We Wept Without Tears

GIDEON GREIF

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TESTIMONIES OF THE JEWISH SONDERKOMMANDO FROM AUSCHWITZ

The Sue and Leonard Miller Center
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Foreword

The author of this historically significant, riveting, and utterly honest book ends his historical survey of the Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau by quoting the few survivors, who say that "No one is really in a position to understand what happened in Auschwitz-Birkenau other than those who experienced" that devilish imposition and challenge themselves. In 1983, Elie Wiesel, too, argued that "Auschwitz defies perceptions and imagination, it submits only to memory. Between the dead and the rest of us there exists an abyss that no talent can comprehend."

I submit that the deadly, searing moments in time, accurately retold to the interviewer by six Sonderkommando members who had miraculously survived the searching eyes of those bent on preventing such surviving witnesses from ever giving testimony, calls this contention into question. Whoever reads the answers to the incisive and relevant questions that were put to these six men by Dr. Greif cannot but observe their day-to-day experiences as members of the Sonderkommando in the crematoria of Auschwitz-Birkenau, daily lives laid open like wounds inflicted by the precise scalpel of a surgeon.

In view of their having been forced to participate in the physical destruction of their coreligionists—indeed, there was no way out of their dilemma other than suicide—one must ask again what motivated their tormentors to act as they did.

The beloved German writer Erich Kästner, who lived through the Third Reich years, had this to say about the profound motivational force that drove the implementers of the Final Solution:

It is hate you love.
Hate is the measure of the world in your designs.
You feed the beast in man.
So human decency declines
And evil rules triumphant in the human minds.
(Kästner, "Marschliedchen," 1932)

As for the other key motives that drove the decision-makers in Hitler's Germany—race and the wielding of maximum power in a "new Europe"—Erich Kästner again has a telling comment:

Power is only for him who after power pines.
It beckons him and gives him eerie signs
And ere he takes her she commands:
Put our bed on heaps of dead!
He who dishonors power is adored by her,
For power is a slut beyond compare.
Killers she loves, with thieves cavorts.
Look in the history books, examine their reports.
(Kästner, "Das ohnmächtige Zwiegespräch," 1932)

The decision-making process of the Third Reich regarding the destruction of the Jews—an outcome for which Hitler hoped fanatically, as his public utterances show—came to fruition as a result of a meshing of "prophetically" enhanced Hitler-centrism and typical top-down encouragement in the *Führerstaat* toward independent initiative by the subleaders. All of this took place within the framework of the Führer's wish and will, with the SS serving as the executive instrument of said will.

Gerald Fleming

Acknowledgments

This book is the product of difficult years of labor. As I researched and wrote it, I probed the history of industrialized murder at the Auschwitz-Birkenau extermination camp, committed the findings to writing, and dealt with the continual presence of horrific suffering. To carry out these tasks, I needed help, encouragement, and support from many people. Below are only some of the numerous friends, acquaintances, and colleagues who provided me with all of these. It is my pleasant duty to thank them all.

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Gideon Greif
Givatayim, Israel
Rosh Hashana 5765
September 2004

Photographs

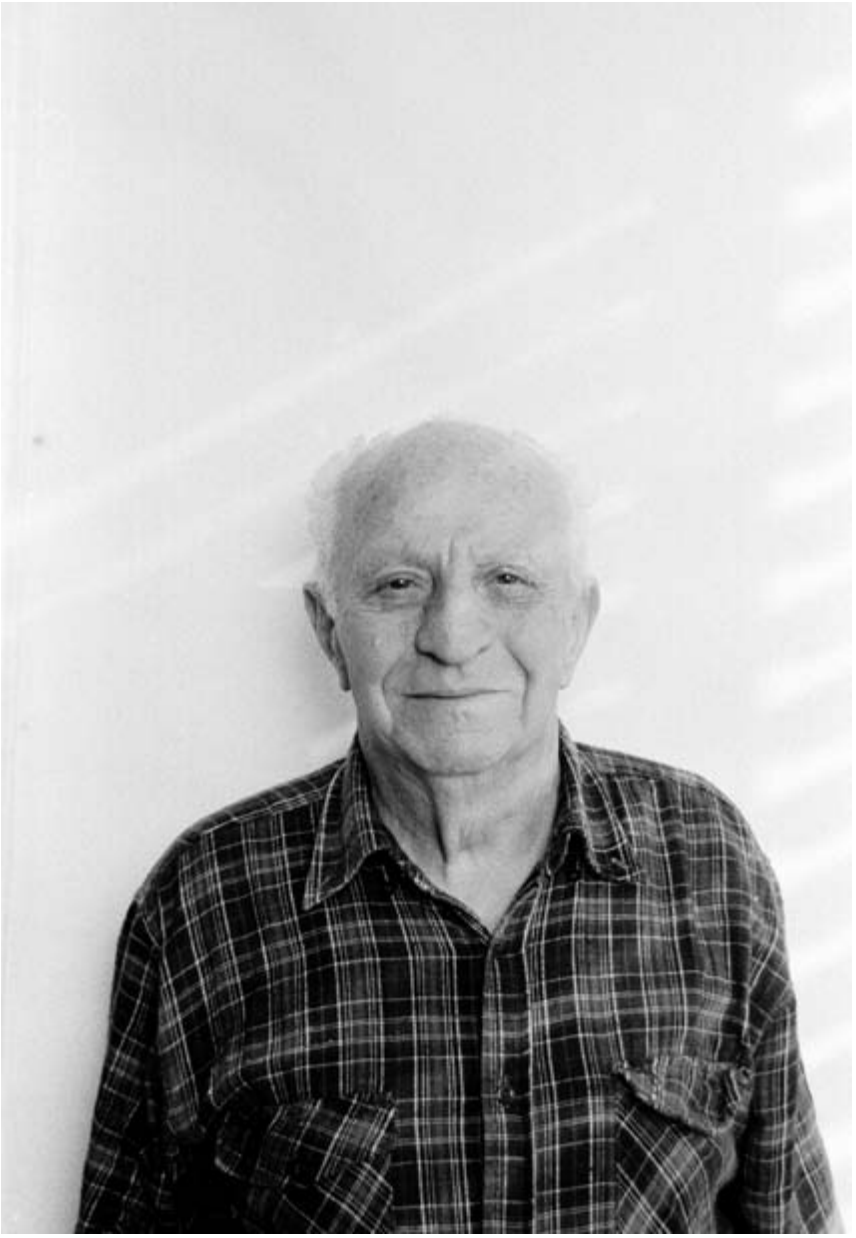

Fig. 1. Josef Sackar. Photo by Matan Ashkenazy, Israel.

Fig. 2. Abraham Dragon. Photo by Matan Ashkenazy, Israel.

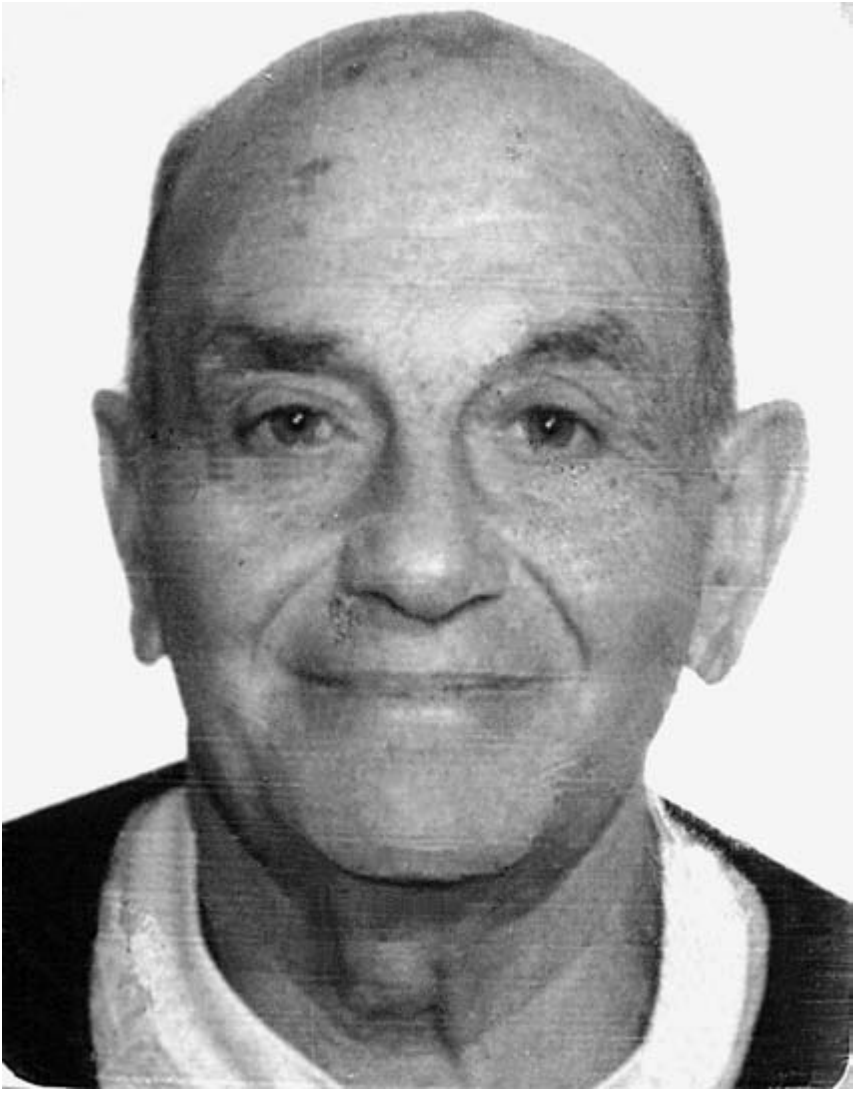

Fig. 3. Ya'akov Gabai. Photo by Rosa Bramy (Gabai), Israel.

Fig. 4. Eliezer Eisenschmidt. Photo by Matan Ashkenazy, Israel.

Fig. 5. Shaul Chazan. Photo by Matan Ashkenazy, Israel.

Fig. 6. Leon Cohen. Photo by Lilli Eis (Cohen), Tel Aviv–Athens.

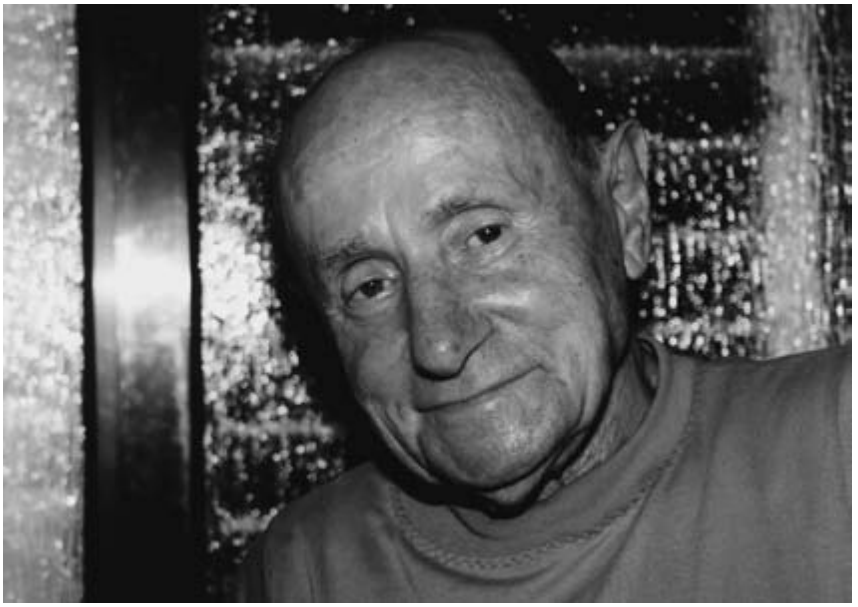

Fig. 7. Ya'akov Silberberg. Photo by Gideon Greif, Israel.

I

The Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau: Portrait and Self-Image

Prologue

"And What Would You Have Done?"

Did you make sure to scrape the ashes of friends and relatives from the furnace?
And did you haul the cart in the snow
To the heap of ashes of those cremated before them?
Were the words "You'll certainly live as long as the furnaces send smoke aloft, because you're needed," directed at you?
And when you were covered with those ashes, did your mouths report what had happened in the language of the barracks?
That extra soup, is it the price of the labor of your spade
And the double ration—the price of the sweat that you gave forth?
And was it to you that the words "Only some time later, at an unknown time,
After the coal, the miner of the coal also comes" were directed?
Not you, not me! We were not put to that ordeal!
You may scrape furnaces every night
And push the cart to its side in your dreams.

But to have the slightest inkling of what happened in that man's heart,
you cannot.
Rather, from time to time you may turn your eyes heavenward, as if
reflecting,
"And what would you have done?"
—Günther Anders

This poem, written during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, reflects an astonishing awareness of the delicate and complex question of the behavior of Jewish victims whom the Germans forced to fulfill certain tasks in the concentration and extermination camps. In this respect, the poem appears to be some twenty years ahead of its time, since such sensitive and differentiated views about the Jewish victims' behavior developed only much later. There is no handy answer to Anders' question, but anyone may answer it for himself or herself, after having heard or read the testimonies of people who witnessed these horrific events.

It is not easy to answer unequivocally how human beings would behave under such extreme conditions. Indeed, the manner in which people would respond to such extreme conditions is unknowable and unforeseeable; the question must be presented in the context of diverse situations in which people may find themselves, specifically when the people at issue were doomed to spend time in the deepest abysses of hell. In the ghettos and transit camps, Jewish mothers sometimes had to decide which of their children to hand to the executioner and which to retain.[1] In several Jewish communities, the *Judenrat* had to prepare lists of community members who would be designated for transport from the ghetto and to extermination.[2] These facts, however, cannot be likened to the plight of the Sonderkommando prisoners. These people could not possibly resolve the spiritual and moral conflicts that they faced as members of the Sonderkommando—most of them, after all, were young men who had not amassed much experience in life—by relying on the binding precedents and norms of the pre-Holocaust world.

Any attempt to produce an accurate, cohesive, and realistic portrayal of these prisoners' lives is doomed to failure because conditions in Auschwitz-Birkenau changed continually. The Sonderkommando prisoners were replaced frequently and people reached the camp from various countries and different cultural and social surroundings. Therefore, the prisoners in each Sonderkommando group were very different from each other and exhibited a wide variety of characteristics—intelligence, moral sensitivities and outlooks, and character traits. All they had in common was their Jewish origin.

"Anyone who wasn't there will never understand it," many Holocaust sur-

vivors state repeatedly. This aphorism is especially valid in regard to the Sonderkommando inmates. Since the situation into which they were thrust has no counterpart or precedent in history, we cannot perform comparisons and do not know how other people would behave under similar circumstances. For this reason, one should evaluate the behaviors and responses of the Sonderkommando inmates with the utmost caution. It is impossible today to reconstruct much of the detailed history of the Sonderkommando in view of its complexity and the changes that occurred during the period at issue. After all, most Sonderkommando prisoners were murdered and left no testimony behind.

THE INCEPTION OF THE SONDERKOMMANDO

The first prisoners whom the SS forced to remove and cremate bodies were non-Jews and were not known as the Sonderkommando. The death facilities in Auschwitz-Birkenau—the gas chambers and crematoria—were activated mainly for the purpose of exterminating masses of Jews, who were indeed most of their victims—over 90 percent of the murdered in Auschwitz were Jews. However, non-Jews were gassed to death as well, including Poles, Soviet POWs, Gypsies (Sinti and Roma), and others. The first Polish prisoners to be killed by gassing had been selected for participation in the "euthanasia"[3] program for the incurably ill. They were transported from the camp to the euthanasia facility at Sonnenstein[4] where they were put to death by means of carbon monoxide.[5] The plan was to send another group of sick prisoners from Auschwitz to Sonnenstein shortly after the first. However, those in the second group were gassed to death in the mortuary of a crematorium that had been activated back in 1940 at the Auschwitz main camp. On September 3, 1941, 250 prisoners in the camp hospital, most of them Polish, were selected to be subjected to experimental gassings using Zyklon B. They were taken to the cellars of Block 11 at the main camp. Afterwards, about 600 Soviet POWs, officers, and commissars were transported from POW camps and driven together into the cellar of Block 11. All were gassed to death.[6]

Non-Jewish prisoners were also gassed to death in the improvised gas chambers known as Bunker I and Bunker II.[7] Some 320 Polish prisoners in a penal colony, for example, were killed there on June 11, 1942.[8] On August 3 of that year, the Germans selected a group of 193 sick prisoners at the hospital, took them to Birkenau, and gassed them to death.[9] On August 29, 1942, they killed there another group of 746 Polish prisoners in the same manner.[10]

The term "Sonderkommando" came into official use in September 1942. The Kommando underwent various changes until it acquired its final form in early 1943. The Sonderkommando originated in the *Krematoriums-Kommando,* a

small group of prisoners who were detailed to the crematorium in the Auschwitz main camp immediately after that facility had been activated in 1940.[11] There are no witness accounts about this period in the history of the Sonderkommando. There is no way of determining how many prisoners served in this detail at the beginning, and the names of only a few of them, including Waclaw Lipka, are known.[12] This group of prisoners was tasked with stoking the furnaces and cremating the corpses of prisoners who had succumbed to the harsh conditions in the camp or had been murdered by members of the SS.

Since initially the camp administration treated prisoners in the *Krematoriums-Kommando* like all other prisoners and had not yet defined them as "bearers of secrets" (*Geheimnisträger,* eyewitnesses to crime), several Polish prisoners managed to be reassigned to other prisoner details. One of them was Wladislaw Tomiczek. We also know the names of two additional Polish prisoners, who had been working in the *Krematoriums-Kommando* in June 1941 at the latest — Jozef Ilczuk and Mieczyslaw Morawa.[13] Another name for this detail was the "stokers" (*Heizer*), a term that corresponded to the actual nature of their work at that stage: cremating bodies. In May 1942, some changes took place. First, from then on the *Krematoriums-Kommando* was composed of six prisoners, three Poles and three Jews.[14] Second, a new group that was employed separately for a certain period — the so-called *Fischl-Kommando,* named for its *Vorarbeiter* (foreman), Fischl — was annexed to the *Krematoriums-Kommando*.[15] This group, made up of four to seven prisoners, was subordinate to the Gestapo office in the camp, the *Politische Abteilung* (political department). The duties of this department included *Krematoriumsleitung,* management of the crematorium. The manager of the crematorium then was Walter Quakernack.

It became necessary to establish the *Fischl-Kommando* because large transports of Jews had begun to reach the camp in May 1942.[16] Since more and more bodies had to be delivered to the cremation site, a special detail was needed to take over this task, which until then had been performed by the so-called *Leichenträgerkommando* (the "corpse-haulers' detail"). The *Leichenträgerkommando* dealt exclusively with removing the corpses of prisoners who had been designated for cremation — people who had died of starvation, sickness, or murder — but could not keep up with the large numbers of victims who were being killed in the gas chambers. The *Fischl-Kommando* prisoners were then on instructed to handle the preparation of bodies for cremation (cremation itself continued to be done by the "stokers") and to sweep out the gas chamber after the gassings. For some time they also had to undress the bodies. From late June 1942 on, however, the people who walked to their death were required to undress before they entered the gas chamber. The *Fischl-Kommando* prisoners gathered the clothing and prepared it for transfer

by another labor unit. They also cleaned the crematorium yard and gathered up anything left behind there by the people who undressed before they entered the gas chamber. The prisoners had to work quickly to finish the task before the arrival of the next transport, so that those in the new transport would not notice any traces of what had happened.[17] Deceit was, from the very beginning, a central principle in the crime.

The *Fischl-Kommando* existed as a separate group for only a few weeks. Around June 1942, the two groups were merged and called the *Krematoriums-Kommando*. According to Danuta Czech, the first transport of Jews designated for extermination as part of the "Final Solution of the Jewish problem" reached the camp from Upper Silesia on February 15, 1942.[18] These people were taken to the gas chamber in the main camp, were murdered there, and were cremated in the crematorium furnaces. In May 1942, the crematorium in the main camp was shut down temporarily, since it was necessary to renovate the chimney and the engine housing of the crematorium.[19] For this reason, the corpses were taken from Auschwitz to Birkenau, tossed into elongated trenches, and covered with soil. The *Fischl-Kommando* prisoners performed these tasks. After the furnace was repaired, cremations in the main camp resumed.

The pits in Birkenau were dug by prisoners in the *Begrabungskommando,* another labor detail that had been established especially for this purpose.[20] In May 1942, when transports of Jews began to reach the camp regularly, another decision related to the extermination of the Jews was made: from then on, the systematic murder of Jews was to take place in Birkenau and not in Auschwitz, since the crematorium furnaces in Auschwitz broke down frequently and were unfit for further large-scale use.[21] It was decided to burn the bodies in large pits on the grounds of the Birkenau camp. They situated the pits in a grove of birch trees. At the edge of the grove were two cottages that Rudolf Höss, evidently in late 1941 or early 1942, deemed to be suitable, after remodeling, for the installation of gas chambers.[22] The first of these buildings was called the "Red House" or "Bunker I"; the second was termed the "White House" or "Bunker II." It is a certainty that the first murders by gas at Bunker I were carried out in the early spring of 1942. Afterwards, Bunker II was used for the same purpose.[23] The aforementioned *Begrabungskommando,* together with prisoners who had been detailed to the bunkers, formed the core of the future Sonderkommando. The SS selected a group of Slovakian Jews for work at Bunker I—approximately two hundred prisoners, thirty to fifty of whom were tasked to the building itself while the others were employed at digging and filling pits. Another group of Jewish prisoners, composed of at least fifty men, was chosen for work at Bunker II.[24] Their task was to make sure that the people walking to the gas chambers would undress as quickly as possible

outside the building. (In August 1942, special undressing shacks were introduced.) Afterwards, the prisoners led them inside, to the gas chamber. As they did so, they had to isolate suspicious and nervous individuals lest they upset the others. They led these people, along with those for whom there was no more room in the gas chamber, to a place behind the building, where SS men shot them to death.

For some time, the gas chambers operated at night only. As the number of incoming transports escalated, a day shift was added. One of the duties of the Sonderkommando prisoners was to clean the chamber painstakingly after the completion of the gassing operation. After the chamber was ventilated, the prisoners removed the remnants of the Zyklon B crystals and the human excretions that had been caused during the gassing. Former prisoners' testimonies indicate that the members of the Sonderkommando sometimes wore gas masks as they worked.

The prisoners removed the corpses from the gas chambers and placed them in groups of ten on carts that ran on a narrow-gauge track. The train hauled the bodies for about three hundred meters to pits that had room for one hundred to six hundred corpses apiece. Afterwards, the prisoners scattered lime on the bodies and covered them with a layer of soil thirty to fifty centimeters thick. From May to September 1942, they filled as many as a hundred pits such as these, which they had excavated on the western side of Bunker I.[25]

As for the work performed by the Sonderkommando in Bunker I, one of the few prisoners in this detail who survived, Arnost (Ernst) Rosin, gave the following testimony:

> One day on our way to work, the commander of our company, an SS man, stopped and said, "Now you'll be given a job that you'll have to do quickly." We reached the first of two pits that we had deepened. There they ordered us to throw soil into the pit. The SS men shouted at us to make us work faster. We noticed that someone had already sealed up the pit in front of us, and we saw pieces of fingers, a foot, a nose, protruding from the layer of soil. . . . We realized that these were people's bodies; we just didn't know how they'd come to be there. We noticed that a narrow-gauge track led from the pit to the cottage that had been fixed up. Not far from the pit we saw large barrels of lime and chlorine and small iron wagons standing on the track near the house.
>
> They brought food and we went over to have lunch. We saw from where we were that our thirty comrades who'd been separated from us had also gone there. They stood far away, but we could speak with them in Slovakian, so that the SS wouldn't understand. From the cautious information

> that they gave us (they weren't allowed to talk with us), we figured out that they were working next to this house and that there were dead people there. They didn't say how the people had been killed. Later we found out, the same way, that they'd been sent there to help kill Jews by gassing in that house, which had been adapted for that purpose.
>
> That was the first Sonderkommando, which first took part in killings by Zyklon B at Bunker I, as they called the renovated cottage with the new windows. The people, who'd been driven to the house in cars, had to undress in the granary next door and were rushed by the SS into the gas chambers that had been installed in the house, on the pretext that they were going to take a shower. Afterwards, thirty members of the Sonderkommando removed the bodies from the gas chambers, loaded them into the wagons, and took them to the pits nearby, the ones that we had dug. There they threw the bodies into the pits and covered them with a layer of soil. Since they worked at night and couldn't see well, it happened that we saw limbs of bodies sticking out the next day, when we came to continue their work.[26]

In July 1942, additional Jews from France were annexed to the group of prisoners who worked at the bunker; in August, several Jews from the Netherlands were added. Most of the prisoners worked at Bunker I because the pits near this facility were much larger than those next to Bunker II. After Heinrich Himmler visited Auschwitz-Birkenau on July 17–18, 1942,[27] the camp authorities had the pits emptied in order to obfuscate all traces and evidence of the crime that had been committed. They patterned this action after a similar operation at the extermination camp in Chelmno, conducted by Paul Blobel of the SS.[28] The units that had taken part in the Chelmno operation and that were also responsible for the liquidation of remnants of corpses on other sites of mass killings were termed *Sonderkommando 1005*. The entire operation of liquidating the traces of the murder was code-named *Aktion 1005*. On September 16, 1942, the commander of the Auschwitz camp, Rudolf Höss, traveled to Chelmno with two subordinates, Hössler and Dejaco, to learn from the experience that Blobel and his men had amassed.[29]

Exhumation of the corpses in the pits of Birkenau and their cremation near Bunker I began in the late summer.[30] At first, the bodies were cremated in bonfires that were set in various locations; afterwards, they were burned in the pits from which they had been removed. By the middle of November, approximately 107,000 corpses had been cremated[31] and all the mass graves had been emptied. The cremation was performed by Jewish prisoners, whose numbers had climbed to four hundred. The term "Sonderkommando" for these pris-

oners was officially introduced in September 1942, when the cremation operation began.[32] It was the term by which Blobel's people at the mass extermination facilities in Chelmno had been known. In Chelmno, the word denoted both the SS men who dealt with the matter and prisoners who were tasked with obliterating the traces of the crime. In Auschwitz, in contrast, the word "Sonderkommando" referred to prisoners only. Furthermore, only in Auschwitz-Birkenau was a group of Jewish prisoners, who performed work of this type, defined as such. Other camps used different terms for groups that did similar work. In the Treblinka extermination camp, for example, such workers were called *Leichenträger*.

The unending task of cremating bodies prompted the Sonderkommando prisoners to entertain thoughts of escape. Two escape attempts are known. On December 7, 1942, two Sonderkommando members, Wladyslaw Knopp and Samuel Culea, escaped. Two days later, six prisoners attempted to escape. (The names of two of them, Bar Borenstein and Nojech Borenstein, are known.) It is almost certain that all the escapees were captured and publicly executed in front of the Sonderkommando. A collective escape was to have taken place on December 9, 1942, but the SS had been tipped off and on December 3 murdered all the Sonderkommando prisoners (about three hundred) as a punishment.[33] Shortly afterwards, another group of prisoners, including Eliezer Eisenschmidt, Abraham and Shlomo Dragon—whose testimonies are included in this volume—and Milton Buki, was selected for a new Sonderkommando.

As more and more transports began to reach the camp, the two "bunkers" proved to be inadequate as mass extermination facilities. The doomed people were forced to undress in a designated location and were then taken to a different gassing facility. Afterwards, their bodies were dragged out and cremated at a location several hundred meters away. This lengthy process, which entailed especially complicated and time-consuming steps, was considered inefficient by those who had set the extermination in motion. To streamline the extermination operation and save "precious" time, those involved undertook a protracted and complex search for a different solution that would maximize the efficiency of all stages of the extermination process: undressing, death by gassing, extraction of gold teeth and shearing of hair, cremation, and gathering the ashes for discharge into the river. Among other things, they devised several projects: construction of a large crematorium in the main camp, improvised "field" crematoria in Birkenau, and so on. Höss, in his autobiography, cited a series of factors that ultimately influenced the decision to build four new combined facilities—crematoria and gas chambers—in Birkenau.

> It became apparent during the first cremations in the open air that in the long run it would not be possible to continue in that manner. During bad weather or when a strong wind was blowing, the stench of the burning flesh was carried for many miles and caused the entire area to talk about the burning of the Jews, despite official counter-propaganda. It is true that all members of the SS detailed for the extermination were bound to secrecy, but even the most severe punishment was unable to stop their love of gossip.
>
> The anti-aircraft defenses protested against the fires because they could be seen from great distances at night. Nevertheless, the burnings had to continue, even at night, unless further transports were to be refused. The schedule of individual operations which was set at a conference of the Ministry of Communications had to be rigidly adhered to in order to avoid congestion and confusion with military rail transports. It was for these reasons that the energetic planning and construction of the two large crematoria [I and II] and the building of two smaller crematoria [III and IV] were completed in 1943. Another crematorium was planned which would have exceeded the others in size, but it was never completed because in the fall of 1944 Himmler called an immediate halt to the extermination of the Jews.[34]

However, one may take issue with the reasons that Höss cited for the construction of new crematoria. One may argue, for example, that the bunkers and the cremation pits were much less expensive, less technically intricate, and, therefore less liable to malfunction. Correspondence with the Topf und Söhne firm, which dealt with crematorium equipment—and, especially, with the firm's senior engineer, Kurt Prüfer—has been preserved. On the basis of this correspondence, one may state that the idea of replacing the bunkers and cremation pits with crematorium and gas chamber complexes might have been the result of a "marketing campaign" by the firm to influence the decision to build four new crematoria at Birkenau. The facilities were turned over to the *Zentralbauleitung der Waffen SS und Polizei SS in Auschwitz Oberschlesien* (Central Construction Administration of the Military and Police Divisions of the SS) on the following dates in 1943: Crematorium I [II] on March 31, Crematorium II [III] on June 25, Crematorium III [IV] on March 22, and Crematorium IV [V] on April 4.[35] In the main camp, a special group of twenty-two Jewish prisoners was established for training in the use of the crematorium furnaces. On March 4, 1943, twelve members of this group (the others had died during their training) and five Poles were transferred to Birkenau for work at Crematorium I [II].[36] The crematorium furnaces in the Auschwitz main camp were deactivated at the end of July 1943. All prisoners in the *Krematoriums-*

Kommando were transferred to Birkenau and put to work at the new crematoria, mainly number III [IV].[37] They were housed first in Block 13 in Sector BIId, together with the remaining prisoners in the Sonderkommando. Concurrently, all prisoners from men's camp BId were relocated to the aforementioned sector.[38]

The interviews with surviving former Sonderkommando prisoners that follow this introductory chapter describe in detail the work of the Sonderkommando in December 1942–January 1945 at the bunkers, in the four crematoria, and at the cremation pits next to Crematorium IV [V].

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF HELL ON EARTH: THE WORK OF THE SONDERKOMMANDO

The Sonderkommando prisoners were forced by the Germans to carry out various tasks related to all phases of the mass extermination enterprise. The prisoners' work was organized in a way that, in many senses, resembled an industrial production process. The extermination facilities in Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned like an assembly line in a factory; they had shift labor, foremen (*Vorarbeiter*), differentiated phases as one would find on an assembly line, a balance sheet showing profits and losses, periods of more intensive and less intensive work, and so on.

In two important respects, however, Auschwitz-Birkenau was quite different from a "normal" factory: its raw material was living people, and its final product was human ashes. As the labor force of this extermination site, the Sonderkommando was a contingent of slaves in a death factory that had no precedent in the annals of humankind. As such, these men became the most tragic figures and the most woeful individuals in the history of the Holocaust. They were the most miserable of the miserable.

When new members of the Sonderkommando were needed, they were selected from newly arrived transports and from the population of veteran prisoners in the camp. In both cases, SS men from the *Politische Abteilung* performed a special selection in which the manager of the crematorium picked out people who, in his opinion, were suited to this particular unit. Most selections were conducted at the quarantine camp (Sector BIIa). Those chosen were told nothing about the duties they would have to perform. They were marched to the Sonderkommando barracks under guard of SS men with dogs, and only afterwards did prisoners who had preceded them tell them the bitter truth.

Five groups of Sonderkommando prisoners carried out various tasks at specific phases of the extermination process: receiving newcomers in the undressing room, removing the victims' clothing after they left the hall, carrying

the bodies after gassing to the place of cremation, collecting valuables, shearing hair and extracting gold teeth, operating the crematorium furnaces for the cremation of the bodies of those murdered, crushing the remnants of bones and body parts that had not been consumed in the flames, and disposing of the ashes.

For the most part, Sonderkommando prisoners were permanently assigned to one of these groups. This, however, was subject to change from day to day. If large transports reached the camp, for example, some prisoners might be placed in a different group. When the workload was heavy, the prisoner-functionaries of the Sonderkommando—*Kapo, Unterkapo, Vorarbeiter, Blockschreiber*, and *Stubendienst*—were sometimes ordered to join them. Almost all of these prisoner functions in the Sonderkommando, including the highest position (*Oberkapo*), were occupied by Jews. They planned out the division of labor on the basis of information about the size of incoming transports with which the crematorium administration regularly provided them. The Sonderkommando prisoners ordinarily worked in two shifts, day and night, depending mainly on the number of people in each incoming transport who were destined for gassing.

The Sonderkommando prisoners were kept in isolation. Contacts with other prisoners were rare. They were not allowed to leave their barracks. A guard stood round the clock at the gate. They took their meals in the barracks and Sonderkommando prisoner-functionaries brought them their meals from the camp mess. Their latrines and bathing facilities were for their use only. Everything was organized in such a way as to thwart any contact with other prisoners in the camp. The Sonderkommando prisoners, like members of other labor details, reported for roll calls, generally once a day. Their roll calls were meant for them alone and were conducted without strict discipline. They wore civilian clothing with a red cross painted on the back of the shirt or jacket, depending on the time of year. They did not wear prisoner uniforms, as did, for example, members of the "Kanada" Kommando.[39]

They spent their "off hours" as they chose in their barracks, trying to overcome the heavy mental burden of their duties. They could sleep or converse without the presence of SS men, who rarely visited their living quarters. This time was given them to rest and unwind after their ghastly duties; it provided them with moments of tranquillity during which they could marshal their strength in time for the next shift. Some of these prisoners, especially Greek Jews, attempted to improve their state of mind by singing and by regaling each other passionately with memories of their lost youth and their beloved family members. If no transports reached the camp, the prisoners swept out their living quarters or simply did nothing.

The Undressing Phase

At the undressing site, the Sonderkommando prisoners encountered newly arrived Jews whom the SS, during the selection on the platform, had earmarked for death. Only here did these prisoners come into contact with people who were still alive, and the crossing of paths rarely lasted more than twenty minutes. Afterwards, they dealt only with bodies. They tried not to be engaged in conversation by new arrivals, to avoid a situation where they would have to deceive them about the actual purpose of their arrival in the camp. Quite often, however, they prodded the people along by saying "Schnell, schnell, schnell!" ("Faster, faster, faster!") or "Bitte, ziehen Sie sich doch aus!" ("Please be so kind as to undress!") and tried to help them—especially the elderly, the ill, and the disabled—as best they could. The Sonderkommando inmates hesitated to tell people to undress totally—knowing how awful and ashamed they would feel in that state—and even tried to avoid eye contact with the naked victims.

This self-restraint shows how hard it was for the Sonderkommando prisoners to be near the people of whose fate, inescapable death, they were aware. Since they saw no possibility of rescue for the doomed, they preferred to mask the truth in order to spare the victims from suffering. In only a few cases, such as encounters with family members, acquaintances, or friends, did members of the Sonderkommando feel that they could not hide the truth.

The sources contain descriptions of the dramatic and tragic tension that permeated the undressing room during the intersection of these two groups of human beings—the Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando, who of course knew everything about the lethal gassing operation that was about to begin, and those who had just arrived in the transport and, in most cases, walked unwittingly to their rendezvous with death.

The Sonderkommando prisoners had to induce the newcomers to undress quickly and evacuate the undressing area, naked, as rapidly as possible. The people left behind their clothing and anything else that they had managed to bring. In accordance with SS orders, those arriving had to leave most of their belongings in the railroad cars or on the station platform. Only small packages were allowed in the undressing room. The Sonderkommando prisoners were instructed to remain especially alert and report any indication of nervousness and suspicion among those doomed to death. They were to calm people who seemed to be suspicious, jittery, or upset. Failing this, they were to isolate such people from the others at once. If asked questions, they were allowed to give brief and noncommittal answers. To comply with the orders of the SS, they were to explain repeatedly to those who had just come that they were about to

take a shower and be disinfected. After the shower, they promised, the newcomers would be divided into several labor groups, would be reunited with their families, and could start new lives in new surroundings in the new camp. The most profound and painful emotion that germinated in the hearts of the Sonderkommando prisoners was a sense of helplessness that beset them relentlessly due to their inability to help these people, who were on the brink of death. The silent drama that they experienced in this regard was best expressed, perhaps, in the words of one of the Sonderkommando members:

> The large, deep hall, with its twelve pillars in the middle that bore the weight of the building, is now powerfully illuminated with electric light. Along the walls, around the pillars—are benches with fixtures attached on which the victims are to hang their clothing. They have long since been standing there, ready. A sign in various languages is affixed to the first pillar. It serves notice that the people have come here to "bathe" and that they [the women] have to shed their clothing just so that it may be disinfected.
>
> We meet with them, we aim frozen gazes at each other. They know everything, understand everything, that this is no bathhouse, that this hall is but a corridor that leads to the grave.
>
> The hall fills up with people. Trucks come with new victims and this "hall" swallows them up. We all stand there in befuddlement and cannot tell them a thing. Even though it's not the first occasion of this kind. The many transports that preceded them gave us our fill, and it wasn't the first time that we'd observed scenes such as the one today. Just the same, we feel weak just now, as though we'd faint together with them.
>
> We remained stricken with bewilderment. Bodies filled with charm and allure are swaddled in those clothes, which are already old, terribly tattered long ago. Lots of heads with curly hair are there, black, brown, blonde, and a few that are gray, and eyes, large, black, deep, oozing charm, peer at us from them. We behold throbbing, trembling, effervescent life, all in its budding phase. It comes filled with juice from the saturated wellsprings of life, like flowers, still growing like lilies in a garden, soaked to overflowing with the rain, saturated by the morning dew. In the sunlight, the glistening drops flash from their flower-eyes, now twinkling like pearls.
>
> We did not have the inner fortitude, the gall, to tell them, these beloved sisters of ours, that they must strip naked. The clothing that they wear, after all, is still a coat of armor that shelters their lives. The moment they remove their clothing and stand there as naked as on the day they were born, they lose their last staff of support, forfeit their last grip, to which their lives are still clinging. Therefore, no one wants to tell them now that they must

undress at once. Let them stand there for another moment, another moment in that armor, in the coat of life.[40]

The harshest experience for the Sonderkommando prisoners—an unbearable ordeal for any human being—was the arrival in the undressing room of a group of Jewish children who had been brought to the camp:

At noon, six hundred Jewish boys twelve to eighteen years old were brought in, dressed in long striped camp clothing, light and torn. They wore shoes or wooden clogs on their feet. The children were so beautiful and well formed; they seemed to glow in their rags. This was during the second half of October 1944. They were led by twenty-two armed SS men. As they came into the courtyard, the *Kommandoführer* [commander of the detail] ordered them to undress in the courtyard. When the children saw the clouds of thick smoke, they realized at once that they were being taken to their death. They began to run in all directions within the courtyard, mad with fear, pulling out their hair, and not knowing how to save themselves. Many of them began crying in terror, and they all started to howl. The Kommandoführer and his assistants beat the children savagely in order to force them to undress. They beat them until the club broke, whereupon it was replaced with another, and the man continued to beat the children on the head. The strong men won. The children undressed, instinctively frightened to death. Naked and barefoot, they clung to each other to protect each other from the blows. And yet they still did not go [into the undressing hall]. One brave boy approached us [and asked] the *Kommandoführer* to let him live. He said he could do any task, even the hardest labor. The answer was a blow from the club to the boy's head. Many children ran wildly up to the Jews. . . . of the Sonderkommando, clung to their necks, and pleaded: "Save us." Others scattered, naked, throughout the large courtyard in order to flee from death. The *Kommandoführer* called the *Unterscharführer* with his rubber truncheon to help him.

The soft and pure voices of the children became bitter and heavy from moment to moment. The loud crying began to echo into the distance; everyone was stunned and carried away by this desperate mourning. With a satisfied smile, with no trace of mercy, and with victorious pride, the SS rushed the children into the bunker with cruel blows. The *Unterscharführer* stood on the stairs and [as they] did not run to their death as ordered, beat each one savagely with the rubber truncheon. Nevertheless, a few confused children still ran back and forth, looking for rescue. The SS men chased them, rushing and whipping, until they took control of the situation and finally shoved them inside. They were unimaginably happy. Were none of them ever fathers of children?[41]

The Sonderkommando prisoners felt helpless and utterly unable to respond to the plight of the victims. Commiserating with the people who walked to their death, they suffered severe pangs of conscience as they watched over those who had just come to the undressing room. Despite their empathy for the doomed, they had to do this job. What is more, they did it under the threat of accusations from doomed people who, in a few cases, regarded them as collaborators with the murderers. The allegations and accusations of a young Jewish woman toward one of the Sonderkommando prisoners in the undressing hall provide a graphic example:

> End of winter 1943. A transport arrived consisting entirely of children who had been picked up in prowl cars from their mothers' houses while their fathers were working in Siauliai [Shavli] and Kaunas [Kovno]. The *Kommandoführer* sent one of his men to undress the smaller children. A girl of about eight years old who was undressing her little brother said to the man: "Go away, you Jewish murderer! Don't put your hand covered in Jewish blood on my sweet brother. I am his good mother now, and he will die in my arms." A boy of seven or eight standing near them said: "You are a Jew! How will you be allowed to lead these pure Jews to the gas only to save yourself; is your life among the gangs of murderers dearer than the lives of so many Jewish victims?"[42]

Removal of Bodies from the Gas Chamber

The act of pouring Zyklon B gas into the gas chamber was performed solely and with no exception by German *Sanitäter* (medical orderlies). After the gassing, Sonderkommando prisoners had to enter the chamber and drag out the bodies. Removal of bodies was one of the most difficult duties that they had. This was their first encounter with the bodies of those killed by the gas, whom they had seen alive just a few minutes before. The spectacle that they witnessed after the chamber was opened was indisputably horrible and nightmarish: a chamber filled with a tangled mass of human bodies. Since the gas had spread from the floor upward, strong victims instinctively climbed atop weaker ones—children and infants—so that they could breathe. In the ensuing chaos and desperation, the weakest were the first to suffocate and the strongest were the last. The resulting piling of human bodies created of a ghastly scene of struggle for life by helpless victims.

The survivors' testimonies describe the appearance of the bodies in detail. The purple, fissured flesh; the faces distorted with pain; and the eyes, bulging and agape, attest to the terrible agonies that these people experienced in their last moments.

To remove the bodies from the gas chamber and drag them to the crematorium furnaces, the Sonderkommando prisoners had to untangle them by force and, in so doing, often had to pull limbs apart. People wanted to stay close to each other when they realized that they were about to die. Once this was done, the prisoners loaded the bodies into an elevator that hauled them up to the ground floor, where the furnaces were located.[43] After all the bodies were removed, the prisoners had to cleanse the chamber of Zyklon B crystals and the victims' bodily discharges in order to obliterate all traces of the previous transport. It was essential to ensure that the next incoming group suspect nothing. To eliminate the unpleasant odor, they sprayed the chamber with perfume that had belonged to the murdered women. In view of the horrific condition of the chamber after the gassing operation, the task of dragging bodies from the gas chamber was a severe ordeal for the prisoners:

> With trembling hands our brethren now remove bolts and raise four bolts. Two doors opened now—of the two large tombs. A wave of cruel death struck, inflicting profound agony. Everyone froze in place, unable to believe their eyes. How long did they stand? How long did they continue to float before our eyes, the women and the young men, palpitating, the last echoes of their words continuing to reverberate in our ears, the gazes in their deep, tear-filled eyes continuing to pursue us?
>
> Now, what has become of them in a trace? The thousands, thousands of effervescent lives, pulsating, singing, are now prostrate, already frozen to death. How has utter silence fallen now? They have been silenced forever. Their gazes remained frozen, their bodies prostrate, motionless. Amidst the silence of rigor mortis one hears only the faint, almost inaudible gurgling of fluids oozing from the orifices of the dead bodies. At this moment, that is the only motion here, in the great world of the dead.
>
> The eyes remain fixed, hypnotized, on the sea of dead naked bodies that we have just discovered. We have just discovered a world of nakedness. They lie there although they did not fall, twisted, tangled into a mass, as if before they died Satan had played a special Satanic game with them and left them in this posture. Here one prostrate corpse is sprawled atop the others. There one clutches the other in an embrace, and both sit next to the wall. Over there only part of a spine protrudes; the head and the legs are pressed into other bodies. Here you see only a hand, a leg sticking into the air, and the rest of the body is down there in the sea of nakedness. You see only parts of people's bodies on the surface of the naked world.
>
> A multitude of heads swim in this vast, naked sea. They hold themselves up over the naked tides. It is as though the people are swimming in the great, deep sea, and only their heads protrude from the deep naked wave.

The heads — black, blond, brown — are merely the only pieces that project from the surrounding nakedness.[44]

Valuables, Hair, and Gold Teeth

By this time, the first group of Sonderkommando prisoners had entered the undressing room to gather up clothing and other effects that the murdered people had left behind. After sorting, these items were loaded into trucks and taken to warehouse-barracks that were known as "Kanada" I and "Kanada" II.[45]

A small group of Sonderkommando prisoners was in charge of searching for and gathering valuables (jewelry, diamonds, etc.) that people had brought to the camp and tried to conceal. Other Sonderkommando prisoners, as described above, ripped gold teeth from the bodies and hacked away their hair.

All these actions were carried out under the close supervision of SS men, lest the prisoners appropriate anything of value for themselves. Valuables and gold teeth, immediately after removal, were tossed into large sealed metal containers equipped with lids. The SS men constantly tried to appropriate the valuables in these containers. Since this was forbidden, they exploited the Sonderkommando prisoners to help enrich themselves. Gold was taken to smiths who melted it into ingots. Other specialists sorted and processed diamonds and jewelry. Hair was washed and placed in sacks for subsequent use in the manufacture of textile products.

The "Stokers"

Another group of Sonderkommando prisoners was tasked with sliding bodies into the furnaces for cremation. The SS men called these prisoners *Heizer* (stokers). In fact, this was also the official name of the group; it was used in camp documents, such as those of the camp employment office. In this case, all Sonderkommando men were listed as *Heizer* for reasons of secrecy. The term "Sonderkommando" is never mentioned.

The furnace duty was physically and psychologically exhausting. Prisoners stuffed bodies into the furnaces and occasionally turned them over with special pitchforks. The furnace area was extremely hot. The "stokers" were always covered with ashes and soot. The furnaces gave off an unendurable stench. The bodies of people who had been alive a few minutes earlier often moved about in the oven due to the high temperature — a phenomenon that drove the prisoners to the brink of insanity. Only physically and psychologically strong men were capable of doing this job. The former prisoners' accounts indicate that these Sonderkommando members were perceived as especially soulless and "savage" individuals. The vile odor that clung to them and their vulgar, cold way of life evoked revulsion and disgust in many prisoners.

The "stokers" amassed experience in the various phases of the cremation process. For example, they had to know how long it took to cremate the bodies, how many bodies should be placed in the furnace together, what temperature was appropriate, and so on. After the cremation, they gathered the ashes and dumped them into containers.

Disposal of the Ashes

The murderers strove to obliterate the traces of their crimes at any price. The larger the scale of mass murder, the harder they worked to obfuscate the evidence. Therefore, another group of Sonderkommando prisoners—the fifth and last—engaged in pulverizing and splitting the remains of bodies that had been only partly cremated. Bones, for example, were ground to dust in the crematorium yard by means of large wooden stakes. In Birkenau, ashes were dumped in many locations, e.g., into a small natural pond between Crematorium III [IV] and Crematorium IV [V] or behind Crematorium I [II]. When large quantities of ashes were amassed, Sonderkommando prisoners loaded them onto trucks that were driven under SS guard to the Vistula River or to its tributary, the Sola (which flowed near the camp), and the ashes were dumped into the water.

Another task of the Sonderkommando was the burning, in a designated location, of objects that the Germans considered valueless, such as photo albums, books, documents, and religious articles such as Torah scrolls, prayer shawls, prayer books, tefillin, and toys. The Sonderkommando prisoners also had to sweep out their living quarters and the crematorium yard.

THE DILEMMA—TO LIVE OR TO DIE?

Members of the Sonderkommando often had to drag from the gas chambers the bodies of family members who had arrived with them in the camp a short time before or after, and afterwards they had to cremate these relatives in the furnaces. Zalman Lewental describes these horrific scenes:

> (21) The Sonderkommando rushed . . . [and it was impossible] to turn this way or that, because of the threat of being shot for so much as looking around. . . . ⟨They⟩ began to rush the rest of the people from [the barracks] into the bunker, poisoned them to the sound [of cries and] shouts like those of the previous night. How terrible and tragic was the scene, when it later became apparent that . . . the same people who dragged the bodies and burned them . . . they understand that ⟨those⟩ they had left behind in their barracks, were their relatives, their dear ones, their families, some of their fathers, others their wives and children. As it appeared later when they set to

work, many recognized members of their families among the dead, as this commando was made up of men who had just arrived with the last transport and were immediately taken to labour. Thus were murdered all the population of our settlement, all our community, our town, our dear parents, our wives, our children, our sisters, our brothers, on 10 December 1942 late at night; the rest were killed the next day.[46]

Sonderkommando prisoners who were unable or unwilling to do this work had only one way of avoiding it—by taking their own lives. The witnesses' accounts indicate that relatively few chose this option. Lewental tries to explain why suicide was so rare in the Sonderkommando:

(31) ⟨Lacking⟩ the courage to end our lives . . . no one did it then . . . why . . . the question remains, and it is hard to answer now. And therefore there were many people who later, after we had recovered, at the first opportunity such as illness or an [unusual] event which shocked us a little, hurried to put an end to their lives . . . outside the camp he was among the hundreds who . . . were shot . . . the question remains . . . [. . .]

(32) Psychologists ⟨say⟩ that a man who has lost all hope, every chance, can no longer react or respond to even the smallest event, for he is like a dead man. Man is capable, energetic and possessed of initiative as long as he believes that by doing a bold deed he will attain his wish. But when his last hope, his last chance is lost, he is no longer . . . he begins to contemplate suicide . . . ⟨It's an issue for the psychologists⟩ they let themselves be led like sheep, the strongest, the bravest among us were those who broke as soon as we were brought here and everything was taken and we were given prison uniforms; then we were ashamed, curled up in a strange coat . . . were taken. . . .

(33) And our intelligence is subconsciously influenced by the wonderful will to live, by the impulse to remain alive; you try to convince yourself, as if you do not care about your own life, but want only the general good, to go through with all of this for this and that cause, for this and that reason; you find hundreds of excuses, but the truth is that you want to live at any price. You desire to live, because you are alive, because the whole world continues to live, and everything that is pleasant, everything to which you are attached, is first and foremost attached to life itself. Without life . . . that is the real truth. And therefore, in short and clearly, should someone ask you why . . . I will answer him . . . this is because . . . insist, I myself [am] weak, captive of a strong desire to live, so that I may correctly evaluate . . . to want to live but not. . . .[47]

Another factor that inspired the Sonderkommando men to survive their ordeal was the wish to give testimony about the crimes that had been committed. These prisoners watched Jews from all over Europe walk to the gas chambers and feared that the Jewish people would no longer exist after the war. Therefore, they were convinced that at least a few witnesses to this tragedy must survive to tell the world about the extermination that had been committed. They considered it inconceivable that no traces of the Jews would remain, that every last vestige would vanish in the gas chambers and the crematoria. They wished to survive at any price in order to testify about the annihilation of the Jewish people and the obfuscation of the crime.

The principle of "live in order to testify" is plainly evident in the writings and remarks of the Sonderkommando prisoners. One of the survivors, Yehoshua Rosenblum, remarked, "In the undressing room I encountered an ultra-Orthodox rabbi and told him what was about to happen. When he heard this, he answered, 'You will live and you must testify to the entire world about what these criminals have done to us.' "[48] Rosenblum tried to fulfill this mission until his dying day.

Filip Müller writes about a similar occurrence that illustrates the dilemmas that beset the decision to commit suicide. He describes people in the undressing room who, on the very night when the sector of the camp where Jews from Theresienstadt had lived was eliminated, began to recite the Jewish national anthem, "Hatikva" ("The Hope"). Deeply affected by the unity of these desperate people, he decided to enter the gas chamber and terminate his life surrounded by Jews. This evoked the following response:

"Yes. One of ⟨the women⟩ said, 'So you want to die. But that's senseless. Your death won't give us back our lives. That's no way. You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us."[49]

The World of the Sonderkommando Prisoners

FORCED HABITUATION

The Sonderkommando members explain their ability to carry out this ghastliest form of forced labor in various ways. One witness explains the problem as follows:

> The heart, the feeling heart, has to be killed off, benumbed of all painful emotion. They have to stifle the cruel sufferings, which spread like a storm through all the limbs. They have to roll with the punches and become blind, unfeeling automatons who don't understand a thing.

> The legs and arms report for work. Groups of members stand there, each assigned to his job: forcibly dragging, extracting bodies from of the tangled mass, one by the leg, another by the arm, whichever is more convenient. You think that the continual dragging will cause them to come apart in another moment. The body is then dragged along the cold, befouled concrete floor, and with its lovely crisp alabaster mass it sweeps all the filth, all the dirt that it encounters on the way. They pick up the spread-eagled body and position it with its face straight out. A very frozen pair of eyes stares at you, as if wishing to ask you: "What are you going to do with me here, my brother?" Sometimes you identify an acquaintance with whom you used to do things back there, before entering the tomb. Three men stand there and prepare him. One shoves a cold pair of pliers into the lovely mouth and searches for a tooth of gold, and when he finds one, he rips it out together with the flesh. Another man shears the curly hair, removing the woman's crowning mane —and the third swiftly removes the earrings, quite often bringing forth a spurt of blood as he does so. Rings that can't be removed easily are dislodged with pliers.
>
> Now [the body] is taken to the elevator. Two men lay bodies on the elevator like logs, and when seven or eight bodies have been placed there, someone motions with a stick and the elevator begins to rise.[50]

In his poignant account of the plight of the Sonderkommando members, Lajb Langfus claims that these prisoners were totally ordinary people who had normal human attributes. They did not harbor murderous tendencies and were not devoid of morals. "They were men with hearts, emotions, and awareness." Just the same, due to the nightmarish tasks that they were forced to perform, most of them got used to their "occupation" and settled into a daily routine that caused them to accept what was going on around them with total indifference.

Langfus believes that the Sonderkommando prisoners were stripped of almost all human emotions but does not hold them accountable for this. His colleague, Zalman Lewental, attempts to explain to the reader how the Germans forced the Sonderkommando men to obey their orders pliantly and unresistingly:

> (25) ⟨We⟩ ran while being chased with the raised clubs of the SS guards who guarded us, until we were totally confused; none of us knew what he was doing, who was doing it, and what was happening to him. We completely lost our senses. We were like dead men, like robots, when they rushed us; we did not know where we were to run, why, what was to be done. ⟨No one⟩ looked at anyone else. I know for a fact that none of us was alive at that

time, none of us thought or contemplated. That is what they did to us until . . . consciousness began to return . . . who is being dragged to cremation, what happened here. Immediately after . . . the people [killed by the gas] were already dragged on a cart, into the bunker, thrown on a bunk, brought [to the place of burning] where people were burned from the previous day, from the day before that . . . bodies were thrown into the fire. After their labor, on their return to the block, when they lay ⟨down⟩ to rest, then . . .

(26) The tragedy began. Everyone began to believe the dream that had been revealed to him the previous night, that [his] family, his dear ones were no longer alive, that he would never see them again, never, for he with his own hands had burned them; and if that was the case, why go on living, what reason could there be for life; food and drink are not mentioned, for of course not only . . . a man of understanding, who can appreciate events, but even an animal or a beast bereft of its descendant or future descendants or those which grew up with it, when they cause it suffering, it protests by refusing ⟨to eat⟩ or drink. As a man who needs . . . naturally at the same time was taken over by . . . a black mood. No more weeping . . . heard on all sides . . . the block is exclusively Jewish when . . . they only took Jews, before they also used to employ Poles and Russians. But not anymore in our times, only Jews . . . this is really a question, whether . . .

(27) . . . to us in the world . . . something . . . something . . . to encourage the will to live and survive all troubles, in the hope of meeting someone while staying alive. Add to that the fact of unparalleled tragedy, the horrors of . . . and only because of that everyone was prepared . . . to tear his eyes out with his own fingernails . . . to imagine . . . the pain, the sorrow, the torture . . . when you know for a fact that a certain person . . . Why, for that reason, why is life . . . has it come about . . . were sinners . . . is there any . . . comfort . . .[51]

HOW THE SONDERKOMMANDO PRISONERS TREATED THE VICTIMS

The Sonderkommando prisoners empathized with the people who entered in the undressing room even though they were aware that they could not help them in any way. They attempted to ease the plight of these people, who were in the midst of the last moments of their lives, or at the very least to postpone their impending demise for a few minutes. Commiseration, displays of interest and empathy, and profound agony over the people's imminent death are the emotions that beset the Sonderkommando men as they led the Jews to the point of no return. Gradowski gives an illustration of these emotions:

> They stare death in the face with such heroism, such serenity. This surprised us more than anything else. Don't they know what's awaiting them? We gaze at them in pity, already visualizing a new, terrifying scene: how all these lives will end in convulsions, how these effervescent worlds, the stirring and throbbing that erupt and ascend from them, will be frozen to death a few hours from now. Their mouths will be forever mute. The glittering eyes, now bewitching in their enchantment, will stare vacantly in one direction only—searching for something in the eternity of death.[52]

Thus Lewental describes the pity and sadness that afflicted the Sonderkommando prisoners as they watched the victims wait for death:

> The Three Thousand Naked Women
>
> It was at the beginning of 1944. A cold snowy wind was blowing and the ground was frozen. The first car that reached Crematorium II [III] is packed with naked women and girls. They are not standing close to each other as they usually do; no, they are no longer capable of standing on their feet for they are totally exhausted; they lie helplessly, one on top of another, moaning and sighing. The car stops, the cover is taken off and the human freight is spilled on the ground, like gravel on the road. Those lying near the car door are first to fall on the hard ground, injuring their heads and bodies so that they no longer have the strength to move. The rest of the women fall on top of them and they are crushed and choked [by the weight] of the burden lying on them. Moans . . . are heard. Some . . . crawl out from under the heap, stand on their feet . . . start to climb.
>
> . . . ground. They are shaking and trembling in the great and terrible cold. Slowly they crawl to the bunker, known as the dressing room, with steps leading down into it like a cellar. The rest are brought by the commando, summoned quickly to pick up the helpless victims; carefully, they pick up the crushed women, breathing weakly, out from under the heap, and hastily bring them inside. Many of them are now unable to stand and must be carried in. They have been in the camp for a long time and they are well aware that the bunker is the last stage of death; nevertheless, they are grateful and nod their heads thankfully to express their gratitude, gesticulating with their hands that it is hard for them to speak. They are gratified and consoled to see in the eyes of the men guiding them a tear of sympathy, of sorrow . . . in the face of the man guiding them down. They are seized with chills, they tremble. . . . Those already inside are permitted to sit down, and the rest of the women are brought in. Down . . . the room is cold. The great cold makes the whole body tremble. A coal stove is brought, but only a few women approach it to

feel the heat. The rest remain mourning, sunken in sadness. The cold is quite tormenting, but they are already so despairing of life and bitter that they recoil from bodily pleasures . . . sit far away, silently. A few converse amongst themselves; others lie exhausted . . . a young woman . . . Bedzin, arrived at the end of the summer. She was the last one left of a large family. She had worked hard all that time and suffered from undernourishment and cold, but her health was good and she had hoped to survive the difficult days. About a week ago, the Jews had one day been forbidden to go out to work. "Juden antreten!" they had been ordered. Whole blocks of young Jewish women, without exception, were gathered and set aside without any examination to tell whether they are in good condition or not, well or ill. They were then brought to Block 25 where they were ordered to undress so that the state of their health might be examined. Having undressed, they were driven naked into three blocks, 1000 women to a block, packed in and locked inside for three days, without so much as a drop of water or a crust of bread. Three days of terrible hunger. On the third night they were given bread, a 1.4-kilogram loaf for every 16 women. . . . "if they had shot us or gassed us, we would be much better off. Many fainted, many others became comatose, they all crowded onto their bunks, in absolute exhaustion, unable to move and powerless. Death did not repel us. On the fourth days of our imprisonment, we were taken out of the block. Those who had fainted were taken to the infirmary; the others were given regular camp food and allowed to rest. Until . . . taken . . . to live.

"On the eighth day, that is, five days later, we were again commanded to undress and imprisoned in the block. Our clothing was taken from us and after long hours of freezing in the cold we were loaded onto cars and thrown onto the ground. This is the sad end of our last deceiving solution. How cursed we are in our mothers' womb, to have our lives flicker out in such a bitter end." She did not finish her last word; her voice was choked in the flow of her tears.

. . . A young woman became hysterical. They examined our faces, looking for an expression of sympathy. One stood in a corner and looked deep into the depths of these poor, helpless souls. He could no longer control himself and burst out crying. A young girl then said: "Ah! I have been privileged to see before I die an expression of sorrow, a tear of sympathy at our sad fate, in this camp of murderers, in which so many are tortured, beaten and killed, in which people see so many murders and interminable horrors, in the camp where our senses become dull and petrified at the sight of the worst horrors, where every human emotion dies to the extent that you can see your brother or sister fall and not even sigh. Yes, here, can there be a man who can feel

> our disaster and who will weep for our fate? Oh! What a wonderful vision, how unnatural! The tear of a live Jew will go with me to my death, the sight of a sensitive man. There is still someone who will mourn us ⟨and I⟩ had thought that we would leave this world like miserable orphans. I find a bit of comfort in this young man; among people who are all murderers and criminals, I have found before my death a man with feelings." She turned away from us leaning her head against the wall and from the depths of her heart came quiet bitter tears. Her heart dissolved within her . . .[53]

Gradowski juxtaposes the Germans' baseness, trickery, and hatred to the Jews' suffering:

> These naïve, wretched victims didn't know a thing, didn't understand a thing, couldn't fathom the dark heinous thinking of these most contemptible sadists and criminals, [the idea] that they had been allowed to live thus far for a specific purpose, a specific Satanic goal. This is why the barbaric scoundrels demanded of them that they continue living. Once the goal is attained by means of this fraud, then their lives are no longer necessary and they are no different from all other Jews, whose ultimate fate is death [. . .].
>
> The whole carefully crafted deception was the best way to lull and paralyze a person who thinks and views matters realistically. All of them, irrespective of sex and age, let themselves fall captive immediately to the charm of the illusion that they were certainly being taken away for labor. Then, once the thugs sensed that the "chloroform" was working well, they set the extermination action in motion.
>
> They shredded the families, tore them apart, separated women from men, the elderly from the young, and in this manner steered them into a trap in the still untenanted camp nearby. Deceitfully they led the naïve victims there, placed them in cold wooden cabins, each group led separately, and then they barricaded the doors with boards. The first method succeeded: it confused and agitated them. They could no longer think logically, since even then, after they'd begun to figure out what was happening—that [the Germans] had locked them up this manner in order to kill them—even then they were helpless and too weak to think about struggle and resistance, since every head, every mind—even those who had not emerged from the stupor of the opium, the illusion—had something new to worry about. Even strong, powerful, brave young men and women, paralyzed by grief, now sat there and reflected about their young wives and the children who had been torn from them that very day. Every tormented call for revolt, struggle, and resistance was immediately gagged by each individual's personal anguish. Every individual, having fallen hostage to the tragedy that had visited his

family, was distraught, unable to think and make plans about the general situation of which he personally had become a part. Thus those who favored freedom, the young energetic masses that were ready for struggle, remained seated, motionless, spent, disillusioned, and broken.

These five thousand victims placed their feet on the first step toward the grave without resisting.

The deception that began long ago, with their Satanic acts, succeeded here, too [. . .].[54]

The following testimony of a Sonderkommando prisoner retells the last minutes in the lives of Jewish women. His account, redolent with hatred of the Germans, is a paean of praise for the courageous Jewish women who, staring death in the face, did not succumb, did not beg for their lives, and did not let themselves be humiliated:

The doors opened wide. Hell spread out before the victims. In the small room leading to the grave stand the senior representatives of the authorities —at attention as if in a military parade. Everyone in the Political Department has come here today for the party. Senior officers, whose faces we have not yet seen in all those sixteen months. There is a woman among them, too, an "SS woman" who works in the headquarters of the women's camp. She has come, too, to see this great "national" celebration, where members of our people are to be exterminated.

I stand aside and watch them both—the brutes, the great murderers, and my sisters, the victims, the unfortunates.

The march, the death march, begins. They march with pride, with determined steps, courageously and bravely, as if walking towards life. They do not crack even then, when they see the final place, the final site, where the last event in their life is about to happen. Their determined legs do not falter when they see that have been taken captive in the core of hell. Long ago, before they came here, they settled their accounts with the world and with life—vis-à-vis God. They had already cut themselves off from life back in the prison cell. For this reason, they now go quietly and with restraint; they do not break down as they approach the end. Strong naked women march without pausing. It seems like an eternity, the march lasts an eternity.

It's as if entire worlds, entire worlds, have been stripped naked and come here for this Satanic outing.

Mothers march with small children in their arms; other children are now led by their tiny hands. Now they kiss the children—a mother's heart is impatient; she kisses her child the whole way. Sisters march hand in hand, tangled in one mass. They want to go to their death together.

> They all look at the officers present with loathing, and rightly, they do not want to give them so much as a glance. No one pleads; no one asks them for mercy. The victims—it is clear to them and they know that they [the German officers] don't have even a spark of human conscience in their hearts and [the victims] do not want to give them the great pleasure of seeing the doomed reach out to them in desperation for clemency.
>
> Suddenly, all at once, the naked procession comes to a halt. A nine-year-old girl is marching, a beautiful blonde girl with large neatly plaited braids that dangle like ribbons of gold on the delicate girlish back. Behind her marches her brave mother, and now she has stopped walking here and with great courage and daring turns to the officers and speaks: "Murderers, thugs, heartless criminals! Yes, you are exterminating us now, innocent women and children [. . .]. Remember, thugs! You'll pay for all this—the whole world will avenge us." Then she spat in their faces and ran with her daughter into the bunker. They were dumbstruck. They didn't have the courage to look each other in the eye. They had now heard a great truth that sliced, cut through, split their bestial souls. They let her speak even though they knew what she'd tell them here and now, but they wanted to hear what a woman, a Jewess, going to her death thought and what she would say to them. Stern-faced, deep in thought, they stand here now, the murderers and the brutes. The woman, from her grave here, had torn the masks off their faces and described the near future to them, how things would soon be for them.[55]

Gradowski's horrifying accounts categorically refute the belief that Sonderkommando prisoners were selfish and indifferent toward Jews who were being led to death. His diary describes the emotions that rocked his colleagues, with whom he lived. Commiseration and love are often intertwined in his writings:

> The victims saw the real truth now: they were being led to death. The last hope, the last ray of light, the last glimmer, has been extinguished. They now contemplate the world as it moves past them like a movie. Their eyes, their gazes, stray in all directions; they would like to imbibe it all.
>
> There, far away, their home blinks at them. After all, they saw it every day. From afar, the large mountains, adorned in their mantles of white, brought daily greetings from their beloved land. Ah! You mountains, you beloved ones. You lie there now, sleeping quietly and dreaming complacently in the moonlight, as we, your beloved children, whose lives were linked to you, have to be obliterated. How many golden days, how much joy and delight, how many magical days in our lives you recorded! How

much love, how much delicacy and tenderness did you bestow on us! How many nights like this night did we spend in your arms, satiating ourselves on the eternally flowing springs—and for whom? They are taking us far from you now, and there, far behind them, behind the mountains, stands a lonely, empty house, waiting in its loneliness for them, its wretched children, to return.

Ah! warm, beloved home. It signals to them, summons them, calls out to its small, loyal children.

And here? Where have they been taken? The world is so lovely, so delightful, so alluring. It beckons, inspires you to live, makes you wish to live. They are linked to it, to the delightful, great, wide world, by thousands of capillaries. It extends its arms to you now and in the silence of night one hears it call out to them: "My children, you loyal ones! I love you dearly. Come to me. There's enough room for everyone here. Long ago I buried lots of treasures here for you. My springs flow eternally to refresh everyone, everyone equally, of whatever status, of whatever rank. I exist for you and for you was I created!"

Now that they, the beloved children, in their loyalty have been moved into the world, the beloved loyal world, they cannot part with it, for they are young, healthy, fresh and vigorous, full of life and wakefulness, and they are everyone. They want to live. It is for this that they were all born.

With their hands, with their own teeth, the victims, all wakeful, adhered to the world, clung to life, as a child does to his mother whom cruelly they wish to take from him. And here it is desired to tear them from the beloved, loyal world, cruelly, through no fault of their own and for no reason whatsoever.

If only they could open their arms wide now and hug and clasp tight, tight to their hearts, the world, the whole world, the heavens, the stars and the moon, the mountains, the snow, the cold soil, the trees, the grass, and everything that exists, how happy they would be.

If only the children, the wretched victims, could now stretch as wide as the wide world, heat the cold soil with their bleeding, flaming hearts, immerse its stiff spine in the so-hot tears, and kiss the limbs of the great, lovely world.

Ah! If only they could now, all of a sudden, take their fill of them, of the world and of life, and satiate themselves with them right now. Then their thirst and hunger for them would be forever quenched. Ah! If only they could embrace them now, the children of the shadows, the wretched victims, who still sit amid the graves and wait their turn for death—how good, how good it would be for them. Now, at these very moments, while they still

exist in this world, they want to caress, to love, to kiss every living, existing thing [. . .].

They stand confused, unarmed, and submissive. They have already seen, beheld, the real truth, the abyss—it already stands there agape, and they are already descending into it. They feel, they sense, that everything, the world, life, the fields, the trees, every living, existing thing, is disappearing and descending to the bottom of the abyss along with them. The stars are being extinguished, the heavens growing dark, the moon ceasing to rise, the world advancing toward perdition along with them. And they, the wretched victims, want to vanish into that swampy sea as quickly, as swiftly as possible.

They toss aside the bundles in which they placed everything they had with them for the "voyage." They no longer want or need a thing.

Freely, unresistingly, they allow the trucks to disgorge them—and they fall as if swooning, like harvested sheaves, straight into our arms. Here, take me by my hand, my dear brother, and escort me as I cover this short remaining distance from life to death. We lead them, our beloved, dear, tender, and delicate sisters; we support them under their arms. We walk in mute silence step by step, our hearts pounding in rhythm. We suffer and bleed just as they do, and we feel that every step is a step away from life and toward death. Before the descent into the bunker, the deep bunker, before they tread on the first step of the grave, they direct their last gaze toward heaven and at the moon—and a sigh from the depths of the heart erupts instinctively from both hearts as though they were one. The tears of our sisters who are being led glint in the splendor of the moonlight, and a dried tear remains on the face of their brother, who escorts them at this moment.[56]

One method that the Nazis used to destroy the prisoners' psyches was to subject them to humiliation and contempt. The confrontation with hundreds of naked women in the undressing room had an especially demeaning effect, especially on religious members of the Sonderkommando such as Zalman Gradowski. The theme of nakedness recurs in many entries in his diary:

A new light now glows in this world, in the vast tomb. In one of the sides of the great hell, women whose bodies gleam with the whiteness of a seagull stand erect, waiting, waiting until the doors of hell open and clear their path to the grave. We men, dressed in clothing here, now face them and observe the scene, motionless. At this moment we cannot determine whether it is real or just a dream. Have we not stumbled into somewhere in a world of naked women, with whom Satan should play a game at once? Or perhaps we're somewhere in a museum, we've stumbled into an art studio where

people sob and groan quietly—and where in particular [the women] have come to model for the artist, to serve the cause of his art.[57]

The writings of Gradowski, a staunchly Orthodox Jew, alert us to the embarrassment and shame that the spectacle of naked women caused him. Therefore, the following account of what he felt as he faced young women in the undressing room, should be interpreted with special caution and sensitivity. The emotions he describes may be construed as the natural and understandable feelings of a young man who thirsts for life. However, Gradowski's tide of emotions in view of the naked women should also be viewed through the prism of the oft-repeated metaphor of life and death: the pairing of young creatures, still maturing, thirsting for love, with their death a short time later. Gradowski expresses his sorrow over the fact that the young women are losing their lives before they have had a chance to live them.

Gradowski's comments reveal a mixture of embarrassment due to the encounter with naked people and the wish to bestow on them a small touch of humanness—warmth, sympathy, nostalgia, and love—a moment before their death, on the way to the gas chamber.

Tell me, my brother—says another [woman], who has long since given up on life and the world forever. She asks us boldly and in a brave tone of voice, "Tell me, brother, how long does it take to die? Is it hard? Does ⟨death⟩ come easily?"

But they do not let them stand that way for long. The murderers—predatory animals—make you notice them at once. The shouts of the drunken brutes split the air. Already, the faster the better, they wish to quench the thirst of their bestial eye with the nakedness of my lovely, beloved sisters. Batons descend on backs, heads, and so on; clothing falls swiftly from the bodies straight down. Some of them are embarrassed; they want to hide somewhere, lest they be seen in the nude. But there is no corner here; shame no longer exists in this place. Morals and ethics walk straight to the grave together with life.

Some of them fall upon us as if they were drunk. They leap into our arms as if they were in love and ask, with embarrassed glances, that we strip them naked. They want to forget everything now; they want to think of nothing now. The moment they took their first step on the stairs of the grave, they did their last reckoning with the world of yesterday, with its morals and principles and ethical concepts. Now, on the brink of their descent, as long as they sustain themselves on the surface of life, only the body still feels, still senses, still has the urge to enjoy something. They want everything, they want to give it everything, the last pleasure, the last happiness over all that

> one can take from life. They want to satiate it now, to satisfy it before it dies. For this reason they want their young bodies, which emit the fluid of life in a powerful gush, to be touched by a strange man, who, here and now, is the closest object of love—that his hand should caress their body now. Thus they will feel as though it is the hand of their lover or their husband that is tenderly stroking their lust-enflamed bodies. They want to inebriate themselves now, my dear, beautiful sisters, and their enflamed lips, drawn toward us in love, lust to kiss us now, as long as they, the lips, remain alive.[58]

The brief contacts between members of the Sonderkommando and Jews in the undressing room illustrate the harsh conditions under which the members of this labor detail functioned. The Sonderkommando prisoners lived in a state of continual utter helplessness and absolute inability to offer the doomed Jews any form of assistance. They fervently wished to save them. However, it was impossible. Although they knew what was going to happen, they could not rescue even one Jew.

There are various opposing views about the behavior of the Sonderkommando prisoners, especially with regard to their attitude toward the living victims and the corpses of the murdered.[59] Those who argue that these prisoners had become animals, monstrously indifferent creatures who had shed all human characteristics including respect for life, should consider the way the Sonderkommando men treated Jews who were parting from life in the presence of their brethren:

> Here the beautiful, tantalizing bodies, now throbbing with life, will roll about like repulsive objects, sprawled on the filthy, dirty ground, and the alabaster-pure body will be covered with human feces.
>
> Teeth together with flesh will be uprooted from the now-articulate mouth—and then blood will flow like water.
>
> Two discharges will then gush from the finely chiseled nose—one red, the other yellow or white.
>
> The gas will turn the face, now white, pinkish-reddish, blue or black. The eyes will fill with blood; you will not be able to tell whether it's the same person who stands here now. And two cold hands will shear the hair from the head, adorned now with wavy hair, and will remove rings and earrings.
>
> Then strange men will don gloves or take up straps and lay them on those hands, now snow-white and gleaming, for then they will present a repulsive sight—one that they will be utterly loath to grasp with their bare hands. They will drag it, this lovely young flower, on the cold, dirty concrete floor. And the body will sweep up all dirt that it encounters.

Then they will be thrown and tossed like dirty, disgusting animals. They will be sent up there in the elevator to hell, they'll be sent to the fire, and within a few minutes those thick, fat bodies will become ashes.

We already see, we already feel, their absolute demise. I look at them, at the pulsating life that fills a large space here, a place as vast as this. They represent entire worlds here. In a few minutes, my eyes envision a different scene: how a member steers a wheelbarrow of ashes to the huge grave there. Now I stand next to a group of women, ten to fifteen in number—and all their bodies, all their lives, will be in that wheelbarrow. There will be neither a remnant nor a memory all those standing here, all those who had filled entire cities, had a place in the world. Immediately they will be blotted out, roots and all—as if they had never, never been born. The pain splits our hearts. We literally feel, experience the agonies of the transition from life to death [. . .].

Our hearts overflow in commiseration with their suffering. Oh, if we could sacrifice entire chunks of our lives for them, our beloved sisters, how happy we would be. We wish to press them to our aching hearts now, to kiss all their limbs, to gorge ourselves on those lives that will immediately vanish. To etch the sight of life, still pulsing now, deep into the heart, and forever to carry the pictures of these lives, which expired before our eyes, deep in the heart. We are all now captives of the nightmare of the thoughts that grip us. They, our beloved sisters, gaze at us in amazement: why are we so "distraught" while they are so quiet? They would like to speak with us at length now: what will be done with them afterwards, after they've become dead? But they haven't the audacity for it—and the secret remains concealed from them to the end.

Now they stand there, the whole naked, enormous mass, and aim frozen stares in one direction, and one can see that a bleak thought is weaving itself into their minds until it is over.[60]

HANDLING THE BODIES

According to their own testimonies, written and oral, some Sonderkommando members indeed became automatons, robots. They sank into an existential state in which everything related to ethics, including life and the human body, had lost all meaning. Others, however, were agonized by the sight of their fellow Jews' prostrate bodies in the chamber after the gassing:

You stand there frozen and observe. Now they've placed two of them up here. Two human beings, two worlds, take their places within the framework of humanity. They lived and existed; they did things, created things.

They acted for the world and for themselves, added a layer to the great edifice, wove a strand for the world and for the future—and in a flash, within twenty minutes, not a trace of them will remain.

Now they've placed another two here, murdered them, they were once beautiful, gorgeous young women. They occupied two whole worlds on earth. How much happiness and pleasure they had created, every smile consolation, every gaze delight, every word spreading charm like a celestial song. Wherever they merely set foot they brought joy and contentment. A multitude of hearts loved them, and now they are sprawled, these two, on the iron slab. Just now the furnace doors will open and within a few minutes not a trace will remain of them.

Now three more are laid there. A boy is pressed to his mother's breast. How delighted, how joyous had the mother been, the father been when their son was born. They built a home, spun a future, the world was an idyll for them—and in a flash, within twenty minutes, not a trace of them will remain.[61]

FRIENDSHIPS AND MUTUAL AID

Even in the ranks of the Sonderkommando, the prisoners sought each other's support, as people under pressure and in distress customarily do. The following quotation gives evidence of powerful solidarity and unity, of concern for their fellows and their fate. These qualities were especially evident when SS men performed selections among the Sonderkommando members in order to eliminate some of them:

Now they are all united in identical fear and trembling. All are captives of the stress of the moments to come. We now felt, now sensed that fifteen months of life together at this tragic, ghastly, terrifying job have forged and glued us into a cohesive group of friends, melted us into one mass, which sprouted into an inseparable, indivisible family of brothers. And so we shall remain until the last minutes of our lives. All for one and one for all. Each of us feels the pain and sorrow of the collective in his heart and soul. Each of us has already begun to sense the impending agony of the suffering. Although no one yet understood how this suffering would be manifested, everyone guessed that "something" must happen, and every "change," as we have long known, is the transition from life to death.[. . .]

The roaring echo of the voice of a predatory beast passed through the despondent barracks with cruel savagery and shocked the profoundly grieving masses into wakefulness. The echo communicated a new order: "Everyone out!" None of us may remain in the barracks now, because those are our brothers standing in the yard. They have to report right now: to take their

things, to take their food, to part with their home, and to part with their camp life — one mustn't be with them any more — we, whom they love, those closest to them, dearest to them, the only close ones whom they still have in this world of death. Now we, their few brethren who remain alive, whom the plunderers have not yet attacked, may not shake hands, kiss, and part with our brethren at this moment, when we are literally everything to them: father, mother, wife, or child. To wish them well, to express the feelings of fraternity that are yearn to find expression at this moment of parting, [this we may not do]. They drive us into the street. No one can remain and stand quietly in place. Small groups of friends pace back and forth, nervous and frightened. Others speak, others say nothing, everything is wrapped in melancholy and minutes of agonizing torture pass. Everyone knows, everyone feels, that this is no longer their place, that there they are already "preparing" to go away and they want to be together with them. Everyone feels that he is the one now standing here, in the street, where "there" is also located. "He" and "him" are one body, one soul, inseparable, indivisible, unwilling to be torn, except that a cruel hand has seized them and is slicing their heart, which has become one, and is tearing their intertwined souls apart. They sense the sorrow and the pain of the surgical procedure that is about to take place here.

Like mourners who gaze with weeping eyes upon the belongings that those close to them had left behind — so did we feel then. We found various discarded objects on the ground next to their bunks. Several hours ago they were beloved and treasured; now they lay here like remnants of medicine that a dead person leaves behind, like forsaken orphans. They are ownerless, no one needs them. They merely evoke pain, they remind us that the whole thing is a testimony to life, to which you used to be connected with thousands of capillaries. Where has that dear life gone now? Now you step on something and you feel a stabbing in your heart. Your friend and brother held that object not long ago. The warmth of his hand, the hand in which that object had rested, is still perceptible. The last gaze that he had aimed at it before he hurled it to the ground in his despair still rests upon it.

Like mourners we felt then, as we raised our eyes and contemplated the terrible void from which a breeze of death wafted. You felt how invisible hands stretched out from the void, from the death, wishing that those who remained would fill it.

Like mourners who behold death like a presence that hovers all around, who cannot liberate themselves from it because it has sunk roots among them — that is how we felt then. We sensed that we are one with it [. . .]. Death and life — a synthesis of two extremes that are everywhere separate — painfully separate, to be sure, but nevertheless separate, differentiated — but here, in

this case, we felt that the two had been fused, that death and life walked arm in arm.

Like mourners who treasure the memory of this entity, to which they were connected by thousands of capillaries, and now that it has died, they etch the sight deep into their memories, their hearts, and their souls—thus we feel that our souls and lives are with them at those moments. We felt that these brethren of ours, now torn from us, affect what is happening inside our own organisms at this moment. We sense in all our limbs that a piece of our lives is now lacking, and that without it we cannot take a single additional step forward.[62]

RELIGIOUS LIFE

According to Zalman Gradowski, members of the Sonderkommando continued to maintain cultural life and even religious life. Unbelievable as it may sound, there were prisoners who recited the Jewish prayers every day in the shadow of the crematorium:

> I go up to see how things are there, behind the great smokestack. Many scores of older friends used to sit up there, and so did young people whose job it really was to sit there, hidden from our guards' view, and say a psalm, a passage of Mishna, or the prayers. They worked only enough to create the appearance of doing something, since the work could be done very quickly and could also be dragged out. It was easily camouflaged. Scores of religious members exploited this, as did the ill and the weak, to distract themselves.
>
> I see that bunker in my mind's eye. One member would stand watch to see whether anyone was approaching, and in the meantime religious Jews would fool their oppressors [. . .]. Often they had to take off their tefillin frantically and rush to work in the middle of prayer as if nothing had happened. Often they were caught "red-handed." The bestial, cynical *Oberscharführer* [. . .] shouted, "Why are they making a 'Bible-Kommando' here?" but deep down he was gratified that among Jews in the heart of hell, next to the very smokestack that was spewing hundreds of thousands of Jewish lives, there could be some who, seated with their backs slumped over the bricks, bricks hardened in the fire of the cremated Jewish victims, of their cremated fathers and mothers, of their cremated wives and children—who would pray, recite psalms, or study [Torah] in this place. If they could still acknowledge here, at this site, that everything is directed by the authority of a higher God, such Jews should be allowed to circulate freely with their faith and immerse themselves in it here and now, too. Such an element makes things better and healthier; one can be quieter. Therefore, they put up with it and made little fuss about the transgression [. . .].

A few members derisively and dismissively contemplated those few dozen Jews who gathered and recited the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service and then the evening service. Some also observed them in disaffection, reasoning that the cruel reality, the ghastly tragedies, that were occurring before our eyes every day could not possibly evoke a feeling of gratitude, not to mention praise, for the Creator of the universe, who has allowed a barbaric people to exterminate and eradicate millions of innocent people, men, women, and children, who are at fault only because they were born Jewish, only because they recognize as omnipotent the sovereignty of the God to whom they now pray, only because they gave the world monotheism. This is why they are being victimized now. After all this, should they sing praises? Why should they recite the "song" [the "Song of the Sea," a paean of gratitude to God following the death of Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea] over the sea of their own blood? To plead to a God who is unwilling to hearken to the weeping and wailing of the innocent little babies? No! Even from those who do not share his understanding of matters he turns away, embittered and angry.

Even Jews who used to be religious now stand coldly at a distance. They have long since stopped being at peace with their God. They are bitter about His ways. They cannot understand how a "father" can consign his children to the clutches of bloodthirsty brutes and to those hands that ridicule and deride Him. They are not overly interested in investigating the matter on their own, lest they lose their last bastion, their last consolation. So they sit in silence, demanding no reckoning from Him and offering Him none. They would like to pray just once, to unburden their hearts, but they cannot do so. They do not want to lie, to lie to Him and to themselves.

Nevertheless, in disregard of the general mood, a group of obstinate religious Jews has surfaced. They have stifled all bitterness, blurred all of the protest that generates inner turmoil, demands and wants a reckoning, and makes people ask "Why?" and answer "No!" They let themselves be ensnared in the web of guileless faith. They believe without doing any reckoning and without investigating. Even now they are convinced — and they show it every day — that everything that is being done to us and everything that befalls us is being directed by a higher authority, the one that we cannot grasp. And that we, with our simple human intellect, cannot figure it out. Even now they cling tightly to their God. They are imbued with profound faith, even when they see, when they feel, when they sense that they are drowning in the ocean of their own faith. And perhaps, perhaps deep in their hearts, they too are being afflicted, made restless, by "something," but they keep up their strength lest they lose the last consolation, the last bastion.

> Amidst the five-hundred-person family—believers and nonbelievers, the disturbed and the composed—a small group stood apart from the outset, then becoming larger and larger, of worshippers who recite all the daily prayers in a *minyan* [a ten-man quorum for public services].
>
> Often one of the nonpraying members was swept away by those prayer melodies. A reverberation, a motif from the traditional Sabbath Eve service reached out to him, and he unhinged it from the tragic, terrifying reality. His thinking was distracted by tumultuous waves of reflections about the world that used to be. He connected with the years that passed. He envisaged himself sitting at home.[63]

A truly amazing aspect of the lives of the Sonderkommando prisoners, as portrayed in their "secret writings,"[64] is the description of how prisoners discharged their religious duties under the camp conditions. In a place where all human values were desecrated and all human values abused and trampled, there were prisoners whose unshaken faith in God and His commandments allowed them to maintain moral values and hope.

The prisoners' oral testimonies confirm that many members of the Sonderkommando continued to adhere to their faith. They did not become atheists, they did not abandon their religion, and they felt that the values they had assimilated remained important. Persistently they believed that all hope had not vanished. Their faith served them as a rampart that protected them from total despair and apathy.

It seems impossible to attempt to imagine how they prayed in the crematoria, or even to imagine that they did it at all. People who had been robbed of their dignity and had every reason to lose hope took pains to remain devout. There were prisoners who continued to recite regularly the three Jewish daily prayers (*shaharit, minha,* and *ma'ariv*—the morning, afternoon, and evening services). By so doing, they sustained the most important human characteristic, one that, in this hell, protected them from insanity. Their fear of God should certainly be considered an indication of the especially high moral level of these men. Even the SS men, who knew about this, may have felt a sort of satisfaction when they noticed the manifestations of sanctity and religious devotion even in this "godless" place. What is more, they almost certainly felt that the prayers, even those addressed to a Jewish deity, provided them with an expiation of sorts and an easing of pangs of conscience. Even the greatest criminal often feels a need, at the moment of his execution, to reach out to God—or to His representative, a member of the clergy.

Resistance Movements and Struggle

PLANS FOR UPRISING

The Sonderkommando prisoners waited continually in the hope that the thousands of young, strong Jews who had been caught in the snare, people who had just arrived in the camp and thirsted for life, would mount a resistance, if only symbolic, before they were murdered. What they saw, however, was usually the exact opposite—submissive, passive acceptance of fate. The general passivity was extremely frustrating for the Sonderkommando. Cases in which new arrivals did resist were highly exceptional and sporadic:

> Hundreds of thousands of strong, healthy lives had already filed past our eyes more than once. There were transports from Russia, from Poland, and of Gypsies. They knew they were being taken here to die but no one tried to resist or struggle. They all went like lambs to the slaughter. One may note only two exceptions in the sixteen months. In a transport from Bialystok, a brave young man, a real trooper, pounced on the sentries with knives and stabbed several of them, drawing blood, and was shot to death afterwards as he tried to escape. The second case, to which I bow my head in respect and admiration, was that of the "Warsaw transport." The people in this transport were Jews from Warsaw who were American citizens; some of them were American-born. All of them were to have been sent together from a quarantine camp in Germany to Switzerland, where they would come under the protection of the Red Cross. Then, instead of bringing them to Switzerland the "civilized," upright authorities brought the American citizens here, to the crematorium, to the fire. That's when the heroic deed occurred: a young heroine, a dancer from Warsaw, tore a handgun out of the hand of the *Oberscharführer* of the Auschwitz "Political Department," Quakernack, and shot the *Rapportführer*, the famous brute *Unterscharführer* Schillinger, to death.
>
> Her action emboldened additional brave women, who beat the enflamed, provoked beasts, the uniformed SS men, and threw bottles and other objects in their faces.
>
> These were the only transports in which people who knew they had nothing further to lose offered resistance. But all those hundreds of thousands knowingly went like lambs to the slaughter.[65]

The clandestine diarists were among the most important members of the Sonderkommando resistance movement. They played important roles in preparing and leading the uprising. Most of them paid for this with their lives; the

few who did not perish in the uprising were killed shortly afterwards. Their writings place special emphasis on the idea of organizing an armed uprising:

> We hoped, we believed, that it would happen today, that today would be the day that our fate would be sealed, the day that we, too, had been awaiting with bated breath, ⟨the day on which⟩ the event would happen, ⟨the day⟩ on which the despairing masses, on the lip of the grave, would raise the banner of struggle and embark together with us, hand in hand, on a struggle between unequal forces. We would then ignore the question of whether it was hopeless, whether we could obtain our freedom or our lives by doing it. The greatest opportunity for us would be the chance to bring this dismal life to a heroic end. These tragic, horrifying matters had to come to an end [. . .].
>
> None of us thought it would go smoothly. We, the brothers in the Sonderkommando, would prove whom we were upon the first attempt to tear apart our family, the first action of that kind. We would prove it because they couldn't fool us into thinking that they were taking us out for labor in which we of all people, and not others, were needed. We were the witnesses for thousands and thousands of living people, the most needed and vital of all, who had been removed from the munitions factories and taken here, to the crematoria. The brutes, those insidious, accursed villains, wouldn't convince us that our working hands were needed elsewhere. No!! They wouldn't put that over on us. The moment they'd lay their barbaric hands on our rock-hard organism and try to set the beginning of the end in motion, we would rise up, all of us as one, awaken like a wounded animal, and leap upon these murderers and criminals who had exterminated our innocent people. Then the decisive moment would come; then we would have the last word. Then the emotion that had been bubbling deep down for many, many months—that of revenge—would erupt like lava, like a volcano. The terrifying, agonizing nightmare of these fifteen months would come to an end.
>
> We hoped, believed, were deeply convinced that only at that moment, when we would confront face to face the menace that threatened to obliterate our own lives, would we sober up, that the tragic reality would reveal the naked truth to us, that all ⟨our⟩ hopes, dreams, and fantasies were but vacuous fantasies, that we had relied on illusions with which we had wanted to delude ourselves, so as to blind ourselves to the tragic menace that continually threatened our heads. Then, realizing that we were running out of chances and losing hope that in the future, if we survived, we could offer a response, a response to the nation of barbarians for the unbelievable, unprecedented assault that they perpetrated against our people—then we would wait no longer; we would not wait to the very end. When we would

> merely sense that our graves were being dug and that the abyss was already widening, the great moment would come. The anger, rage, pain, and agony that these terrifying months of tragic labor had left behind, that had infused us with the throbbing urge for vengeance, would come together. All of this would converge with the danger that was threatening our own lives, and then, coupled with the urge to avenge the collective and defend our lives—they would kindle, enflame, invigorate our every fiber. Then the explosion would come. The inferno of vengeance would set everyone ablaze—everyone, without exception, irrespective of physical strength and personal characteristics [. . .].
>
> We are all on the verge of the grave, on the brink of extinction, about to begin the last throes. We would now answer the question of why and wherefore we lived and existed in the heart of hell and inhaled the air of death and extermination of our own people. So we believed.[66]

The idea of organizing a Sonderkommando uprising transcended the limits of wishful thinking. It matured gradually and became real in late 1944.

THE SONDERKOMMANDO UPRISING

The event known in the history of Auschwitz as the "Sonderkommando uprising" took place at around midday on Saturday, October 7, 1944, at Crematoria I [II] and III [IV] in Birkenau. From the chronological standpoint, it was the third uprising by Jewish prisoners in Nazi extermination camps, following those in Treblinka[67] and Sobibor.[68] The terror, brutality, and cruelty of the SS treatment of the inmates occasionally prompted groups of prisoners in Auschwitz to rebel, as in the uprising of the penal detail[69] and the mass escape of Soviet war prisoners.[70]

The Sonderkommando rebellion, however, was unique because it was the only demonstration of armed resistance in the history of Auschwitz. The heroism and valor of the Jews who took part in the uprising are magnified by the fact that they operated in total isolation. Although they cooperated with various underground groups in the camp resistance movement, with which they jointly planned a general uprising, they had to rely on themselves only. On the day the uprising broke out, they were totally on their own.

The Sonderkommando uprising became possible due to the cooperation between the resistance movement organization, the "Auschwitz Struggle Group,"[71] and its Jewish section. The first prisoners in this Jewish section had been sent to Auschwitz from two localities, Ciechanow and Mlawa, in 1942, and it was they who established the core of the resistance movement organization, which planned defense and revenge actions. The membership of the

group grew steadily and a branch was established in Birkenau as well.[72] Its best-known members were Motek Bielowicz (Mordechaj Halelli), the head of the group; Arie (Lejbek) Braun; Israel Gutman; Jehuda Laufer; Godel Silber; Noach Zabludowicz; and Moshe Kulka.[73] Soon after its formation, the Jewish group established close relations with the resistance movement in Auschwitz for the purpose of cooperation.[74] By so doing, it obtained assistance from one of the leaders of the international group of the resistance movement, Bruno Baum.[75] As noted, the resistance movement organizations intended to organize a general uprising of all prisoners—Jewish and non-Jewish—in the belief that the Red Army was approaching and that the Poles who lived near the camp would take part in the fighting.

In the preparations for the uprising, members of the Jewish group who worked at the Union plants, where explosives for artillery shells were manufactured, were tasked with smuggling explosives for use in the manufacture of bombs and hand grenades. Israel Gutman and Jehuda Laufer, two prisoners who had been assigned to Union, made contact with young women, Jewish prisoners who worked for this department.[76] The women were persuaded to cooperate with the resistance movement by a young Jew from Ciechanow, Roza Robota, who worked at the *Bekleidungskammer* in the women's camp.[77]

Roza Robota was informed about the uprising preparations by Noach Zabludowicz,[78] a friend from her teenage years in Ciechanow. Roza organized a group of Jewish women who worked at the *Pulverpavillion* (the explosives hall). These prisoners, taking their lives in their hands, agreed to smuggle the gunpowder when they returned to the Birkenau camp after work. They were able to remove only minuscule quantities that could be concealed from the SS inspections. After bringing the gunpowder to the camp, they turned it over to Roza Robota, who handed it to the Sonderkommando prisoners with whom she was in contact. They concealed the explosives in hand trucks and stuffed them, later on, in hollow spaces inside the walls of the crematoria buildings.[79]

Israel Gutman and Jehuda Laufer also obtained small quantities of gunpowder with the assistance of the same Jewish women prisoners, who smuggled it to them in pieces of bread and in mess tins equipped with false bottoms.[80] After the gunpowder reached the Auschwitz main camp in this fashion, it was received by members of the resistance movement. The prisoners who smuggled the gunpowder out of the plant—Ester (Estusia) Wajsblum, Alla Gärtner, and Regina Safir—would later pay for this with their lives.[81]

For several months, Sonderkommando members who belonged to the resistance tried to persuade the leadership of the camp-level resistance movement to start an armed uprising at once. They stepped up their advocacy of this course of action even before mass transports from Hungary began to arrive in

the spring of 1944. However, the leadership postponed the decision to embark on a general uprising, expecting conditions to improve and advising members of the Sonderkommando not to instigate any form of rebellion by themselves.[82] The Sonderkommando prisoners came to the conclusion that their relations with the leadership of the camp resistance movement were married by a conflict of interests and goals.[83] While their comrades in the camp resistance pleaded for patience, they were confronted with the murder of thousands of Jews who were being deported to Birkenau at precisely this time. Thus, they set several dates for an uprising of their own. Leon Cohen mentions August 19, 1944, as a planned date for the Sonderkommando uprising, which was later moved forward to August 15.[84] The camp resistance movement, relying on assistance from the approaching Red Army, repeatedly urged the leaders of the Sonderkommando group to postpone its planned uprising, and the latter accepted this reluctantly.[85]

After their plans for an imminent uprising were repeatedly frustrated, some of the Sonderkommando prisoners decided to act against their oppressors on their own. Gradually they realized that the camp resistance movement was unable to launch an uprising due to insufficient arms and preparation. They became convinced that their days were numbered and that they would probably be murdered shortly. In early October 1944, rumors about German plans to liquidate these men, who had witnessed their crimes, began to circulate. This being the case, it became problematic to continue hoping that someone would be able to escape and tell the world about the threat that this death factory presented.[86] The Sonderkommando prisoners became even more strongly aware that time was running out when they noticed that their ranks were steadily contracting.[87]

As the flow of transports tapered off, the Sonderkommando prisoners knew that they could wait no longer.[88] Several events in the camp before the uprising expedited their decision to act on their own. In late June 1944, the Sonderkommando was moved from barracks in Sector BIId of the men's camp to the crematorium building in order to isolate these prisoners from the others even more effectively.[89] On September 23, 1944, another two hundred Sonderkommando prisoners were murdered in an act of deceit and cunning.[90] In August 1944, SS *Hauptscharführer* Otto Moll murdered the *Oberkapo* (Chief Kapo) of the crematorium, Jakob Kaminski, one of the organizers of the future uprising, a unique personality within the ranks of the Sonderkommando.[91]

Several days before the uprising, the Sonderkommando members discovered that they would soon follow their three hundred comrades to death. In late September, *Scharführer* Hubert Busch demanded a list of three hundred members who would "have to go over to a different Kommando." Several prisoners

whose names appeared on the list told the leadership of the Sonderkommando resistance group. They stated that they would resist the transfer actively and would not merely let their enemies "escort" them from their posts. This led to a split in the Sonderkommando between those who opted for immediate action and the leadership of the Sonderkommando resistance group, which still decided to refrain from independent action. This would endanger the cooperation between the camp resistance and the Sonderkommando underground.[92]

Since there were no surviving eyewitnesses to the uprising and no documents related to it, the course of the uprising is shrouded in many doubts and much vagueness. The story is told in several versions, especially in regard to the heroism of the participants and the symbolism of the act. However, the testimonies of former prisoners allow us to reconstruct the uprising in its general contours. When a prearranged signal was given, Sonderkommando prisoners attacked SS men in the yard of Crematorium III [IV], using any improvised weapons that they could obtain (stones, metal poles, hatchets, and hammers), detonating several hand grenades that had been prepared previously, and attempting to leave the crematorium building. Many of them tried to escape to the nearby forest and others fled toward Crematorium IV [V], which was several dozen meters away.[93] In the course of the combat, which took the Germans by total surprise, the prisoners killed three SS men, Rudolf Erler, Josef Purke, and Willi Freese,[94] and injured many others. Several prisoners, using rags soaked in gasoline, managed to set fire to mattresses in the crematorium loft.

The fire spread quickly and flames erupted from the building. According to various testimonies, the Sonderkommando prisoners blew up the crematorium using hand grenades that they had prepared secretly, and containers that they had filled with explosives and concealed in various locations.[95]

When the prisoners at Crematorium I [II] noticed the flames and smoke billowing from Crematorium III [IV] and heard the gunfire of the SS men, they inferred that the general uprising in the camp had begun and went into action immediately.[96] First, they attacked an *Oberkapo* named Karl Konvoent and threw him alive into the burning furnace of the crematorium.[97] Unable to contact their counterparts at Crematorium III [IV] and panic-stricken due to the large number of SS men approaching them, they tried to escape through the fence. They rushed to the barbed wire that separated them from the women's camp at Sector BIb, used pliers to cut the wires in several places, ran with all their strength for several kilometers until they reached Rajsko, where a satellite camp of Auschwitz was situated, and went into hiding in a granary. However, they were quickly surrounded by SS men, who set the granary afire and killed all the prisoners who had secreted themselves there.[98] The Sonderkommando

members at Crematorium II [III] did not take part in the uprising because their Kapo made them enter the building and assured the SS officer who entered the crematorium that the prisoners under his command would not join the others. All of these prisoners, except for one who was tried for sabotage and executed,[99] were kept alive for the time being.

In the course of the uprising, 451 Sonderkommando prisoners were killed by the SS and 212 remained alive.[100] Among those killed were almost all the leaders of the uprising: Jos'l Warszawski, Zalman Gradowski, Lajb Langfus, Ajzyk Kalniak, Jozef Deresinski, and Lajb Panusz. The number of victims increased later, when the SS murdered Jankiel Handelsman, among others, in the investigations that followed the uprising.

A short time later, the SS began to investigate the entire event. The discovery of explosives led to the women prisoners who were working at the Union plant. The young women were accused of provisioning the rebels. Concurrently, the *Politische Abteilung* (Political Department) began a rapid and hard-hitting investigation to determine the identity of the camp prisoners who had collaborated with the Sonderkommando. The suspicion centered on four women: Roza Robota and three of her comrades, Regina Safir, Ella Gärtner, and Ester Wajsblum. All were imprisoned and interrogated under severe torture.[101] The members of the Jewish organization in the resistance movement feared that the women would succumb to the torture and reveal their names.[102] This, however, did not happen. Shortly before the execution, Noach Zabludowicz managed to visit Roza Robota at her cell in Block 11, the "death barracks." The Jewish Kapo of that block, Jacob Kozelczyk, enabled him to enter. With her last strength, Roza wrote a note to friends who had been active in the resistance movement. One of her comrades relates:

> Noach brought us a note from Roza, last regards. She told the torturing investigators that at her initiative she had given the materiel to the Sonderkommando and that she did not regret it. She wrote to us that it was hard to part with life but we had no reason to fear. She would not betray ⟨us⟩. Her name was the last that the Gestapo discovered in this affair. She had only one request: that one day, if any of us make it to the free world, that they exact revenge. The note was signed with the salutation *hazaq ve-emats* [Be strong and brave].[103]

Roza and her three comrades were executed by public hanging at the women's camp in Auschwitz on January 6, 1945 (or, according to other sources, January 5) — two during the morning roll call and two at the evening roll call — only a few days before the camp was evacuated. Before they placed the noose around her neck, Roza Robota managed to call out, "Sisters, revenge!"[104]

Israel Gutman, a member of the Zionist resistance organization in Auschwitz, described the significance of the Sonderkommando uprising, which ended with the death of most of its participants:

> The Sonderkommando uprising ended in failure. No outside force came to the assistance of the prisoners who rose up, and the masses of prisoners in the camp did not join their struggle. However, the day of the Sonderkommando uprising became a symbol of revenge and encouragement for the prisoners. In a place that had for years been a killing vale for thousands upon thousands of victims . . . these were Jews who fought. In the vast camp, with its prisoner population in the tens of thousands, a handful of Jews had ruptured the climate of submission and acceptance of fate. The Sonderkommando uprising demonstrated to prisoners of European nationalities that the Jews were capable of fighting and knew how to defend their lives.[105]

The testimony of one of the former women prisoners gives us an indication of the prevailing atmosphere at the time and the witness's assessment of the actions of the courageous participants in the uprising:

> October 1944. A cold, quiet morning. An ordinary morning in Auschwitz.
>
> In the barracks, the work continues. Suddenly, boom! boom! . . . An explosion not far from the barracks. We are shaken. The whole camp seems to have flown into the air. Frightened, panting men appear between the barracks. They run, seeking a place to hide. They race toward the barracks and race back at once. It's no use; there's nowhere to flee to. SS men clutching handguns chase them, shouting wildly. Bullets split the air; fire erupts.
>
> "Halt!" You can hear them shout. A torrent of bullets accompanies their cries. I see how the boys fall. Dead bodies sprawl everywhere I look.
>
> An SS man bursts onto the scene. "You're still alive?" he asks a bloodstained boy angrily—and kicks him with his booted foot. "You're still alive, you dog?"
>
> The boy, on all fours, cringes, turns over, and remains prostrate near the barracks, blood seeping from his face. His eyes start to emerge from their sockets.
>
> In the distance we now see billows of smoke. Burning! The second crematorium is burning. The sirens begin to wail, aggravating the commotion. What happened? A revolution? An uprising at the crematorium?[106]

After the uprising ended, those still alive lauded the courage of the Sonderkommando members who had fallen in the battle:

> Who can evaluate the bravery and devotion of the individuals among our comrades, three of whom remained in the crematorium to blow it up, sacrificing themselves deliberately . . .

> When ⟨hope⟩ finally steals into the heart. . . . perhaps in spite of everything, they will renounce. . . . is it not deliberate sacrifice of their lives, with a whole heart, self-sacrifice, for no one forced them at that moment. Indeed, they could have escaped with everyone else, and yet they did not do so. On the contrary, who can correctly evaluate the greatness of our comrades, their heroism? Indeed, the best of us fell there, the best, the dearest, the chosen elements, . . . with dignity, to life and to death.[107]

Documentation about the Sonderkommando Prisoners

THE SONDERKOMMANDO PRISONERS AND THE SECRET WRITINGS

Our most reliable sources about the spiritual world of the Sonderkommando members—their thoughts, their emotions, their concerns, and their sufferings during their work at the extermination facilities—are the contemporary materials known as the "secret writings of the Sonderkommando." These documents consist of diaries and other historical and literary texts, written mainly in Yiddish and mostly by Orthodox Jews who were active in the resistance movement that planned the Sonderkommando uprising, including Zalman Gradowski, Chaim Herman, Lajb Langfus, Zalman Lewental, and Marcel Nadjary. They wrote clandestinely on their wooden beds in the barracks in Birkenau and buried the documents in the soil near the crematoria, in hopes that the writings would be found and serve as source material for historical studies on the extermination of the Jewish people in Auschwitz and the work of the Sonderkommando prisoners. The writers believed that they were the last witnesses to the murder that the Germans had committed and they feared that unless these crimes were described, posterity would have neither proof nor documentation of those horrific events that had occurred.

Thus far, only a small portion of the diaries has been found, and even these fragments were damaged by the effects of many years of moisture. The tin cans in which the texts were concealed did not suffice for adequate protection. Furthermore, the diarists had no access to high-quality paper and ink. Nevertheless, the texts that have been found are of immense historical value. The writings, which were eventually published in several languages in a volume titled *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*,[108] acquaint us with the entire process of extermination at Auschwitz and allow us to understand what went on in the minds of these men and to grasp the philosophy of life that they created. The writings answer important questions: What did the Sonderkommando prisoners, the direct witnesses of the tragedy that befell the Jewish people, feel? How did they treat the victims during the minutes in which they saw them alive for the

last time? What emotions did they experience as they dragged thousands of bodies from the gas chambers? How did they judge themselves and their associates? How did they judge the Germans? Did they attempt to disrupt the extermination process? What were their last thoughts?

The portrait of the Sonderkommando prisoners that emerges from the "secret writings" is in most cases the absolute opposite of the jaundiced assessments that have long been made of these people; it attests to their emotional and passionate response to the all-pervasive death and the loss of their brethren. The writings allow us to contemplate the affective and moral world that the Sonderkommando members inhabited under the terms of this reality. Further proof of the credibility of the writings is the fact that the authors did not attempt to blur or prettify the reality and did not refrain from presenting the negative aspects of their daily lives. By the same token, they did not hesitate to stress the high-minded nature of certain actions that they took in the inferno that was Auschwitz.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION FOR POSTERITY

The members of the Sonderkommando intended to leave behind a written documentary record for posterity — a monument to the Jews who had been murdered before their eyes and a chronicle of their suffering. Zalman Gradowski, one of the diarists, addresses an appeal to those who would find his diary some day:

> Beloved finder of these writings!
>
> I have a request of you. The actual goal of my writing, in fact, is that that my life, doomed to death, at least take on content ⟨and⟩ that my days of hell, my hopeless mornings, acquire a purpose for the future.
>
> I report to you only a part, a minuscule part, of what happened in the hell of Birkenau-Auschwitz. You will imagine how it, the reality, appeared. I have written much more than this. I believe that by following the traces of the markings, you will certainly realize and visualize how our people perished.[109]

Elsewhere, Gradowski writes:

> I also dedicate these lines, here, so that you may realize, to some extent, how and in what manner the members of our people perished, and the revenge that you should take, at least on their behalf but also on ours, since who knows if we, in whose hands the actual proof of all the brutality rests, will be privileged to live until the moment of freedom comes. Therefore, I wish by means of my writing to stir your emotions and to plant a spark of revenge that will unite and enflame all hearts, and may those who made an ocean of blood of my people drown in an ocean of blood.[110]

The authors were always accompanied by the thought that their writings would eventually become a historical source. Zalman Gradowski pleaded with the future finder of the writings not to call off the search until he finds all the documents buried in the soil of Birkenau:

> Dear finder, search all the plots of land. Dozens of documents that shed light on everything that happened here—written by myself and by others—are buried there. Many teeth were buried here. We scattered them, we workers of the Sonderkommando, across the whole area, as far as we could reach, so that the traces of the millions who were murdered here would be found. As for us, we long ago surrendered all hope of living until liberation day. Although we have received gladdening reports, we realize that the world is allowing the barbarians to root out the remnants of the Jewish people on an unsurpassed scale.[111]

The Sonderkommando prisoners were more afraid than others that posterity would be unable to grasp the tragedy of Auschwitz. For this reason, they wished to provide the world with accurate and reliable reportage about the extermination of the Jewish people, the reasons for it, and the course of the entire process:

> Who knows whether, at tomorrow's sunrise, the witnesses to the night of cruel darkness will be able to arise; and you will think in your heart that the great and terrible destruction around you was brought about by cannons; you will certainly think that the great destruction of our people was the result of the war. You will think that the complete elimination of the People of Israel in Europe was caused by a natural disaster, as if by a sign from God the earth had opened and swallowed the Jews who had gathered there from all over the world.
>
> You will refuse to believe that such a shocking destruction was carried out by human beings, even if they were transformed into predators.[112]

Zalman Lewental stressed the importance of his work and that of his colleagues for history. "As you see," he wrote, appealing directly to his readers, "a ⟨certain⟩ man interested in history took the trouble to collect pictures, facts, reports, and just information that will certainly interest the future historian who will come here, and be of advantage to him."[113]

Lewental wanted to make sure that the Holocaust would be accurately perceived and understood and that none of the events related to it would be blurred or distorted. He was worried because he knew that the human mind lacked the capacity to imagine the events that were really occurring in the camp. This is why it was so important for one of the Sonderkommando pris-

oners to survive. Only such a person could produce an authentic sketch of the events and the suffering.[114]

Even such a sketch, however, does not tell the whole truth, Lewental stresses. The real truth is "immeasurably more tragic and terrible." Thus, it is the historian who must continue to search, because the material is buried in the soil in many places and finding it is of the utmost importance.[115]

> As no one can imagine the events, he will not believe ⟨knowing⟩ that we have been left alive by the power . . . the strength of those . . . to inform, there will be one more . . . ⟨of⟩ our restricted circle. Who among us will remain by chance, in which we do not believe even one percent. And to find a parcel of written material I find ⟨it⟩ my duty to conceal . . . so that his work will not be lost and ⟨so⟩ that the world . . . futu⟨re⟩ ⟨I⟩ cannot permit myself to describe everything I would like to describe for various reasons. Ma⟨in⟩ly because we are unfortunately under supervision and observation. But I cannot imprison in my heart ⟨these things without adding⟩ a few words on the great mistake we all ma⟨de⟩ thinking that they needed people for labor. They really need them⟨.⟩ But ⟨the⟩ matter of destroying the Jews is his . . . first priority. Above all . . . this will be depicted by the rese⟨ar⟩chers, in the future the historians and afterwards the psychologists a clear and definite picture of the histo⟨ry⟩ of the events and the suffering [. . .] . . . a real st⟨ory⟩ of reality, for ⟨this⟩ is still not the whole truth. The truth as it really exists is immeasurably more tragic and terrible. In the notebook . . . dig, to ⟨search⟩ . . . it is by chance that ⟨this⟩ is buried in several places. Keep looking! You will ⟨still⟩ . . . find more.[116]

Fear for the fate of the writings stalks Langfus at all times. He appeals to the person who will find them:

> I would request that my various writings of the past, signed with the initials A.J.R.A., and buried in jars and boxes in the courtyard of Crematorium II [III], be collected, as well as two larger writings: one titled "The Deportation," hidden in the bone pit of Crematorium I [II], and another writing titled "Auschwitz." The latter was hidden in a heap of bones on the southwest side of that courtyard. I later recopied them and they were separately buried in the ashes of Crematorium II [III]. I would request that they be edited and published together under the title, "The Horrors of Murder."
>
> We are now going to the "sauna," the 170 remaining men. We are convinced that they are taking us to our death. They have selected 30 men to remain in Crematorium IV [V].
>
> Today is November 26, 1944.[117]

SELF-CRITICISM

The "secret writings" are a profound, authentic reflection on the tragic situation in which the Sonderkommando members found themselves. First of all, it seems self-evident, as Primo Levi wrote, that one cannot expect people who experienced such humiliation to provide an objective account of the facts; instead, they would be more likely to produce something "that is at once a lament, a curse, an expiation, an attempt to justify and rehabilitate oneself: a liberating outburst rather than a Medusa-faced truth."[118] How surprised we are, then, to find that the authors of the "secret writings" did not attempt to conceal anything and to sugarcoat or falsify reality. On the contrary, their writings contain a great deal of criticism of Sonderkommando prisoners who underwent moral decline and of the entire group, which the other prisoners regarded negatively.

We know that the authors of the writings, most of whom were Orthodox Jews, attempted to resist the negative phenomena that occurred among members of this labor detail and quite often succeeded.

Zalman Lewental was anguished by colleagues who had slipped into indifference and became used to this work. He complains that simple, modest, average Jews were going about their work in a routine way and were viewing passively the crime that was being perpetrated against tens of thousands of their brethren:

> (34) . . . Why are you doing ⟨such⟩ unbefitting work, how do you live, what's the purpose of your life, what do you want? . . . What would you still like to accomplish in your life? . . . Here lies ⟨the weak point⟩ of our Kommando, one that I do not intend to defend at all. However, I must tell the truth: more than one of them has lost his humanness with the passage of time. You are ashamed of yourself, they have simply forgotten what they are doing, the nature of their work. They adjusted ⟨over time⟩ until it leaves you totally bewildered. . . .[119]

According to Lewental, the first Sonderkommando groups were composed of the most modest and outstanding people. However, they were unable to survive and were soon killed. Everyone who remained in the Sonderkommando was of the less estimable type, people of lesser quality who came from the lower social classes, in the negative sense of the term.[120] Most of them eventually became insensitive. Even in this Sonderkommando, however, there was no shortage of people who offset the inhumanity and rejected the principle of "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."[121]

The Moral Problematics of the Sonderkommando

The postwar period was marked by a strong desire, particularly on the part of the victims, to grasp the seemingly unfathomable magnitude of the Holocaust in moral terms. After the horrifying experiences of expulsion, dehumanization, and extermination slowly started to sink in, people began asking why those events had occurred? How could mass extermination on such a scale have become reality? Especially among former prisoners, a feeling emerged that now, in hindsight, after having survived the hell of Auschwitz, it would be possible to look back at past events more lucidly and to identify and bring to justice the criminals who had murdered millions of people in the concentration and extermination camps. In a commonly found side effect of this intense desire to do justice, even some victims were assigned a burden of partial blame. To account for this widespread phenomenon in survivors' attempts to overcome the trauma of the Holocaust, one may cite various psychological, historical and sociological factors.

Many found it a daunting prospect to try to haul themselves out of this abyss of human history by bringing those responsible to justice. Most of the perpetrators remained faceless, hidden within the machinery of the camps and undetectable in the system of the National Socialist state. Additionally, many wanted persons—including many of those who had worked and murdered in Auschwitz—had managed after World War II to escape to South America or to disappear under false identities in Germany or other countries. Apart from a few attempts, Jewish survivors rarely had the strength, the time, and/or the patience to hunt down and bring to justice the murderers of their people, since they were preoccupied with starting a new life and building new families as a partial substitute for their murdered family members.

To confront the crimes and comprehend their moral dimension, it was necessary to locate actual perpetrators (or at least collaborators) who could be held responsible for them. Consequently, many thought it somehow reasonable to accuse the most "available" suspects—mostly those former *Funktionshäftlinge* (prisoner-functionaries such as Kapos and block elders) and also members of *Judenräte* (Jewish councils), who had been forced to assist the Germans in one way or another. Even though for Jews this meant turning against their own brethren, it was, at the time, a solacing and, perhaps, a necessary way to vent the accumulated frustration and grief. Accusations against specific persons could be lodged with relative ease, especially since many former functionaries lived among the survivors and were rather easily identified and caught, despite their attempts to maintain a low profile. In this drive for justice, Jewish society gave some attention to the detection of collaborators.

The charge of collaboration was directed with special vehemence against former prisoner-functionaries in the camps. Generally, these prisoners performed duties that helped the camp administration to keep the technical, bureaucratic, and economic aspects of camp life functioning smoothly. In most cases, they had been forced to carry out the most repulsive and horrible duties.

As part of the prisoner-functionary system, the Sonderkommando men had to work day and night at the places where the mass murder was actually performed—the gas chambers and the crematoria. Since they worked at the very core of the extermination process, they were also at the center of attention when it came to controversies about the morality of prisoner-functionaries and possible collaborators.

The fact that prisoner-functionaries worked in the area of the crematoria and gas chambers was common knowledge among prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Although its members were isolated and hardly ever seen in the camp, the Sonderkommando was known to exist and the bad reputation of this particular labor detail evoked fear, pity, and uncertainty among the ordinary prisoners in the camp. Even though camp prisoners knew in great detail about the extermination grounds and the Sonderkommando, they generally repressed this horrible awareness. They avoided thinking about the extermination facilities—naturally enough, since they were existentially afraid of being murdered there some day or being assigned to the Sonderkommando themselves.

Many attempts to set the Sonderkommando phenomenon within some kind of moral framework are riddled with fundamental uncertainties. Very few sources provide clear and instructive ideas about how one might explain and understand the behavior of the Sonderkommando prisoners. The complexity of the situation of those Jewish prisoners has given rise to a number of biased depictions that mostly fail to understand the delicate plight of the Sonderkommando and often do injustice to its members by accusing them, either directly or indirectly, of assisting the German perpetrators. Most writings, however, express profound uncertainty, indicating the fundamental problems that underlie any attempt to station the Sonderkommando phenomenon within any analytical moral framework.

In our attempt to accomplish this, it seems wise to bear in mind *ab initio* several basic questions about our stance as historical observers and ask how legitimate it is for us to serve as judges in this context. These questions are especially pertinent in respect to our ability to comprehend and evaluate phenomena that are unprecedented in human experience. Indeed, there is no precedent for Auschwitz—and, *a fortiori,* for the situation of the Sonderkommando and its range of imposed duties.

Many former prisoners explained in their testimonies that everyday life in the

Nazi camps was based on a total reversal of all moral standards. Power was associated solely with the license to oppress and torture. Values such as mercy and compassion were regarded as extreme, negative, and perverse. There seemed to be no limit to the barbarity and abuse that took place in these camps; unscrupulous human imagination was given free rein. This state of *Umkehrung aller Werte* (reversal of values), which so effectively pervaded and dominated daily life in Auschwitz-Birkenau, affected the prisoner-functionaries in particular. Due to their positions, it became an existential imperative for them, more than for other prisoners, to make some adjustment to the structure of evil. Even people who had no vicious, sadistic, or unscrupulous traits were often dragged into violent and cruel behavioral patterns during their internment in Auschwitz.[122] The constellation of concentration and extermination camps was in fact based on this forced adaptation. It gave rise to an upside-down world or, as the writer and Auschwitz survivor K. Tzetnik put it, "another planet," a place that functioned on different, unknown principles.[123]

Without having to subscribe to the more specific connotations of this term, one may accept the general contours of an image of Auschwitz that was also expressed in numerous testimonies by Auschwitz survivors: Auschwitz constituted a reality that had never before existed and had never been known, let alone experienced. Never before in history had people been forced to cope with moral situations as complicated and muddled as those in the concentration and extermination camps. To survive Auschwitz, one had to act and think differently. Prisoners had to adapt, especially since normal behavioral standards did not suffice to resolve the psychological and moral conflicts that they faced in the camps.

The incredible distance between our "normal" world and the "upside-down" world of the camps, in which evil was so omnipotent, should again highlight the problematic position of the historical observer who attempts to evaluate the victims' behavior. Primo Levi writes succinctly on this point: "I believe that no one is authorized to judge them, not those who lived through the experience of the Lager and even less those who did not."[124]

The extreme conditions under which the Sonderkommando prisoners had to live should remind us to contemplate their plight with the utmost sensitivity. This necessity, however, does not mean that a specific inquiry into the behavior of the Sonderkommando prisoners should in every case lead automatically to unqualified sympathy.

The following pages examine various perspectives on the moral aspects of the Sonderkommando phenomenon. After we discuss very definite condemnations of the Sonderkommando and then examine more nuanced portrayals, we conclude by arguing, on the basis of Primo Levi's account, that even a

highly differentiated discourse about the morality of the Sonderkommando has certain limits that cannot be surmounted without doing injustice to the victims of Auschwitz.

CONDEMNING THE SONDERKOMMANDO

Let us begin by noting that while non-Jewish survivors expressed harsh criticism of the Sonderkommando, Jewish survivors have been the most pungent critics of all. Even today, one often hears highly derogatory opinions about the behavior of prisoners in the crematoria. Often the mere mention of the word "Sonderkommando" evokes a tempest of highly emotional responses and reproach.

Many of the strongly worded negative portrayals of the Sonderkommando are based on ignorance and prejudice. Some reports by former camp prisoners actually show indications of envy of the Sonderkommando men. After all, despite their ghastly duties, the Sonderkommando generally received better rations than other inmates did, and the difference between "sufficiently nourished" and "undernourished" usually meant the difference between life and death for the average inmate in Auschwitz-Birkenau. As a result, several former camp prisoners have accused the Sonderkommando members of being henchmen of the SS, who brutally and ruthlessly chased the victims into the gas chambers.

A Polish former prisoner, Alfred Fiderkiewicz, describes the following scenario:

> Unimaginable things happened at the crematoria.[. . .] Each transport marched quietly to extermination between two rows of Sonderkommando men, equipped with thick truncheons.[. . .] Whenever one of the doomed persons erupted [at the Germans] in rage, as sometimes happened, his comrades had to control him and lead him to the gas chamber.
>
> Whenever unforeseen incidents occurred, the SS men ordered [the Sonderkommando prisoners] to "calm" whoever had disturbed the quiet. When that happened, things escalated to outright slaughter. The Sonderkommando men, equipped with their truncheons, drove the doomed person into the gas chamber.
>
> The SS men stood aside and watched the behavior of the Sonderkommando men intently. They studied them to see whether they were doing their jobs correctly, i.e., whether they were beating the condemned people with due force and without pause. Whenever an SS man saw that a member of the Sonderkommando was not exerting himself sufficiently during the beating, he shoved the Sonderkommando man into the gas chamber. Every

member of the Sonderkommando knew this. Thus, the condemned people were beaten without pause.

They had no mercy for the bodies of those who stumbled and fell; they were simply trampled. Those who still stood erect and witnessed the whole spectacle rushed straight to the gas chamber like lightning [. . .].

This was the practice for transports that were designated for murder by gassing, those in which the number of arrivals exceeded a hundred. In cases of smaller transports, the process was even simpler. The people were ordered to undress in front of the crematorium but were taken not to the gas chamber but straight to the furnace room. They were ordered to line up at the back of the room and as soon as SS men and Sonderkommando men were guarding [them] on both sides of the column, they were ordered to walk, one after another, toward the iron stretchers that were next to the furnace doors. There, each doomed person was shot by an SS man and fell onto the stretcher. The twitching body was placed in the furnace[. . .].[125]

This description of the Sonderkommando prisoners reflects a general tendency to portray the Nazis' victims as co-perpetrators and to discount the fact that the Germans had brutally forced them to take part in the extermination process. The Germans elicited a comparable reaction, for example, when they established the *Judenräte,* Jewish councils that had to implement the Nazis' anti-Jewish decrees in the ghettos. The Jews in the ghettos often gained the impression that the actual criminals were the members of these *Judenräte* rather than the Germans, who were rarely seen within the ghetto confines. In this context, the Sonderkommando certainly represents an extreme form of the German "strategy of deception." This, in turn, is reflected in several rather drastic survivor testimonies that accuse Sonderkommando prisoners of crimes that were actually committed by the SS:

The front of the queue reached the crematorium building. Several SS men explained the procedures that preceded registration in the camp and the requirement of a shower and disinfection for everyone. . . . The shower heads, installed in the ceiling, earned the people's trust.

Those who did not want to advance to the interior of the chamber were beaten by the Sonderkommando men, who were equipped with thick truncheons, so that they would enter.

However, when this too did not work, the Sonderkommando men set German shepherd dogs on them.[126]

One cannot state categorically that no one in the Sonderkommando ever behaved violently. Still, the notion that Sonderkommando prisoners ever

chased victims into the gas chambers with truncheons remains highly questionable. There is no evidence of such conduct, and the various speculations indicate that it might have occurred only under very exceptional circumstances and only under direct and severe pressure from the SS. The claim that Sonderkommando prisoners set dogs upon people who arrived at the crematoria simply clashes with the facts and seems absurd. Only SS guards used dogs.

Whereas some statements appear to be plainly inaccurate, others create distorted portrayals by interpreting the facts inadequately and drawing the wrong conclusions. Symptomatic of such a misinterpretation is the characterization of the Sonderkommando prisoners by Janina Komenda, a Polish former inmate of Auschwitz:

> The Jews were the only workers in the crematorium, and by various ruses they dispossessed those doomed to murder of their valuables, gold, and diamonds. . . . They hoped that these objects would enable them to bribe the SS men and gain better treatment and benefits, in view of the fact that the Jewish units that worked in the crematoria were replaced with great frequency . . .[127]

Komenda's account is not fundamentally erroneous as such. In many cases, prisoners took valuables from the dead and used them for bribery. A wedding ring or a bracelet could save or at least prolong one's life. What is more, many Sonderkommando members passed on such valuables to other prisoners and thereby contributed to the covert redistribution of goods and assistance in the camp. This aspect of their behavior seriously challenges Komenda's interpretation, i.e., that the men robbed the victims of their belongings "by various ruses." Importantly, prisoners did not regard taking possessions from the dead and secretly using them in the camp as an act of theft. Instead, they called it "organizing"—essentially a strategy of survival that was widely employed by any prisoners who could obtain valuables or food or other items during their work. This further illustrates the inaccuracy of Janina Komenda's perspective.

Such accusatory attitudes vis-à-vis the Sonderkommando are commonly marked by a strong degree of generalization, in which a few observations suffice to "sustain" inferences about the prisoners as a collective. This approach is highly problematic, especially when one bears in mind that the Sonderkommando consisted of hundreds of people who worked in the crematoria over a period of several years. These prisoners came from many different countries (in fact, almost all countries from which people were deported to Auschwitz) and had highly diverse cultural backgrounds. Consequently, their responses to the circumstances in Auschwitz and the methods they used to live and survive in the camp were also very dissimilar. In view of these differences, it seems impossible

to portray the community of Sonderkommando prisoners as a homogeneous group. The large number of testimonies elicits a complex general sketch that allows for a wide variety of actions and behavioral patterns.

The following extract underscores the diversity of the Sonderkommando prisoners' behavior:

> The Sonderkommando, drunken Jews that treated their fellow citizens who were condemned to death in a similar manner like the SS men. A sad example of how man could lose himself in the burning "jungle" called Birkenau.
>
> And at the same time, the prisoners of this commando went to the fence, risking their lives, and passed to the Jews inside the camp the last greetings of those who were sent into the crematoria. They brought sometimes little reminders, photos, or also letters, as a last message from their dying family.[128]

To do justice to the complexity of the Sonderkommando, it is crucial to integrate the many different and often contradictory testimonies into a more comprehensive description and evaluation. However, even a renowned scholar such as Hannah Arendt did not live up to that standard; her analysis drew several unjustified and biased conclusions. Arendt's accusations against Jewish prisoner-functionaries elevated the controversy over the moral probity of the Sonderkommando men to a peak. According to the historian Jacob Robinson, Arendt's knowledge about the Sonderkommando seems to have been drawn largely from descriptions by the camp commander, Rudolf Höss.[129] Höss never claimed that the Sonderkommando prisoners had been directly involved in murder, but Arendt accuses them of active participation in the extermination process anyway and condemns them for having committed these crimes in order to escape death.[130] This accusation against the Jewish prisoners is both unjust and unfounded. The fact that they had worked in the crematoria under duress apparently had little influence on Arendt's observations; she simply states that they must have joined the Sonderkommando for selfish reasons. What is more, she even claims that the actual work of the Jewish prisoners in the death camps was the operation of the extermination machine. She states: "The well-known fact that the actual work of killing in the extermination centers was usually in the hands of Jewish commandos had been fairly and squarely established by witnesses of the prosecution [in the Eichmann trial]." Furthermore, she writes of the Greek Jews: "In Auschwitz, many Greek Jews were employed in the so-called death commandos, which *operated* the gas chambers and crematoria."[131] There were Greek Jews in the Sonderkommando; they carried out the same tasks in the crematoria as other Jews did. They were part of the whole *Kommando*. In no case did any member of the Sonderkommando *operate* the gas chambers. The killing centers were under the exclusive supervision

of the SS. The Sonderkommando functionaries, no matter where they stood in the hierarchy, only followed the orders and threats of the SS men. Arendt's distortion of the facts—like her widely criticized charges against the *Judenräte*—have led to heated public debates and a tide of outraged reactions.[132]

Jacob Robinson takes vigorous exception to Arendt's analysis and convincingly disproves many of her misapprehensions:

> It was the SS men or their Ukrainian accomplices who did the work of the actual killing. The Special Units [Sonderkommandos] worked on corpses only, but did not take part in the gassing. [. . .] The newly discovered diary of the Auschwitz Special Unit shows that its members, in compiling secret lists of victims, daily risked their lives for the sake of preserving a record of what took place. Contrary to Miss Arendt's statement, the revolt in Auschwitz was not 'one of the few in any of the camps.' The fact is that in three out of the six extermination camps—in Sobibor, in Treblinka, and in Auschwitz—there were revolts of the Special Units.[133]

Robinson provides further proof for his claim that only the SS operated the gas chambers by examining the behavior of the SS. Quoting from the diary of Johann Paul Kramer, an SS physician in Auschwitz, Robinson shows that the SS men used to argue over who would be allowed to participate in the gassing, since such special tasks were usually rewarded with special rations, for example: five liters of strong spirits, five cigarettes, or some sausage and bread.[134]

Arendt's dependence on Höss as the primary source for her arguments leads to another serious problem. In his skillfully written diary, Höss attempts to cast himself in the role of a neutral observer. In fact, however, he represents the perspective of the murderers. In many of his remarks he expresses his astonishment about the behavior of the Sonderkommando prisoners and, in particular, their ostensible docility and submissiveness in response to the orders of the SS. The following is an abstract of Höss's depiction of events in the undressing room:

> Actually the eager assistance of the Sonderkommando during the undressing and the procession into the gas chambers was very peculiar. Never did I see or ever hear even a syllable breathed to those who were going to be gassed as to what their fate was. On the contrary, they tried everything to fool them. Most of all, they tried to calm those who seemed to guess what was ahead. [. . .] It was interesting to see how the Sonderkommando lied to them and how they emphasized these lies with convincing words and gestures. . . .
>
> As strange as that was, so was the general behavior of the Sonderkom-

> mando. All of them knew for sure that when it was over, they themselves would suffer the same fate as thousands of their race had before them, in whose destruction they were very helpful. In spite of this they still did their job with an eagerness and in a caring, helpful way during the undressing, yet they would also use force with those who resisted undressing. This always amazed me. They never spoke to the victims about what was ahead of them. They also led away the troublemakers and then held on to them firmly while they were being shot. They led the victims in such a way that they could not see the NCO who stood ready with his gun. This enabled him to aim at the back of their necks without being noticed.[135]

Looking closely at Höss's seemingly guileless but actually artificial astonishment, one may clearly identify the perspective of the criminal perpetrator who is unable (and unwilling) to understand and analyze his victims' motives realistically. Höss perceives the behavior of the Sonderkommando prisoners from an extreme distance. His intention is not to comprehend the victims' actions but to justify the victim's overall situation. In effect, his "objective" description becomes rather cynical and vicious: the person responsible for the plight of the Sonderkommando men dares to observe and even criticize them. Höss's testimony reflects what the SS actually had in mind for the Sonderkommando: it established these labor details to relieve the actual criminals, themselves, of the burden of responsibility and to shift the weight of guilt to the victims. The SS did not wish even their victims to feel innocent.[136]

Höss's astonishment expresses, first and foremost, what the Jewish prisoners represented in his eyes: *Untermenschen* (subhumans) whose state of absolute degradation and humiliation naturally lay beyond the understanding of a "normal," not to say "superior," human being like him. Thus, Höss's writings should be used only with extreme caution. Reading Höss too uncritically (as Arendt does) easily leads to severe misinterpretation of events. Although Höss describes the facts truthfully to a certain degree, he provides either no real explanations or only those that justify his own ideology. Consequently, his account convicts the Sonderkommando prisoners of his own crimes and cites their behavior as proof that they indeed represent *lebensunwürdige Wesen* (beings who have no right to live).

Contrary to the implications of Höss's writings, the behavior of the Sonderkommando in the undressing room shows no trace of collaboration with the machinations of the SS. The Sonderkommando prisoners did not calm and deceive the people who faced the gas chambers in order to assure the SS a smooth killing process. Rather, their concern was to give the victims, at this desperate moment, a touch of warmth and humanity on their short walk to the

gas chamber. In this respect, the secretive behavior of the Sonderkommando men was intended for the victims' benefit. All they could do in their position was to shorten the victims' last minutes of agony by concealing their fate. In a world of continual atrocity that had by then numbed their senses and feelings, these encounters and brief conversations with the people—moreover, fellow Jews—in the undressing room provided the Sonderkommando prisoners with a rare opportunity to relate to others like human beings.[137]

It is symptomatic of the sweeping condemnations of the Sonderkommando, such as those propagated by Arendt, to pay little heed to the few moments in which the Sonderkommando prisoners could exhibit an openly empathetic attitude towards the victims. Again, Höss's descriptions provide a good example of how easily one can misrepresent the ostensibly callous and emotionally hardened Sonderkommando prisoners as moral degenerates:

> It often happened that Jews from the Sonderkommando discovered close relatives among the bodies and even among those who went into the gas chambers. Although they were visibly affected there never was any kind of incident.
>
> This incident I witnessed myself: As the bodies were being pulled out of one of the gas chambers, one member of the Sonderkommando suddenly stopped and stood for a moment as if thunderstruck. He then pulled the body along, helping his comrades. I asked the Kapo what was wrong with him. He found out that the startled Jew had discovered his wife among the bodies. I watched him for a while after this without noticing anything different about him. He just kept dragging his share of bodies. After a while I again happened on this work party. He was sitting with others and eating as if nothing had happened. Was he really able to hide his feelings so completely, or had he become so hardened that something like this didn't bother him?[138]

In contrast to this depiction, other reports about the reactions of Sonderkommando prisoners after encountering close relatives revealed that beneath the hardened surface remained human beings whose mental and emotional lives had not yet been totally shattered. For some reason, however, those who accuse the Sonderkommando often disregard and omit accounts like the following:

> Once an old Jewish woman arrived in one of the transports from Hungary. Her son was in the Sonderkommando. She spotted her son, who was stacking up wood in the compound of the crematorium. Happily she ran towards him. Her son, who had already been looking for his mother among the dead

for a long time, was shocked. His mother asked him what would happen to them.

"You are going to rest here," he replied.

"Where is this strange smell from?"

"From burning rags . . ."

"And why did we come here?"

"To take a bath."

The son handed the towel and the soap to his mother and both went inside. They disappeared into the hell of the chimney. There were thousands of similar macabre incidents, tragic encounters, and incredible scenes. Every day, reports of such incidents were transmitted to us through eyewitnesses [. . .] Nothing could surprise us anymore.[139]

This episode documents a case of humanity and love on the verge of death: The Sonderkommando prisoner voluntarily prefers to die together with his mother, although he could have saved (or at least prolonged) his own life by leaving his mother alone. Such accounts clearly contradict biased depictions of the Sonderkommando such as Arendt's.

Höss's observations represent a special and extreme category among the eyewitness sources—the perspective of the SS perpetrator—and reveal upon careful reading an important warning. Höss's diary shows how consistently an observer, while engaging in a meticulous description, can shy away from any attempt to really understand the behavior of the Sonderkommando men. His writings point to many relevant questions, yet in his hypocritical mind-set he does not dare to answer or explain even one of them. Ultimately, his remarks make a mockery of the victims and cloak and disguise his own malice:

Where did the Jews get the strength to perform this horrible job day and night? Did they hope for some special luck that would save them from the jaws of death? Or had they become too hardened by all the horror, or too weak to commit suicide to escape their plight? I really have watched this closely, but could never got to the bottom of their behavior. The way the Jews lived and died was a puzzle I could not solve.[140]

Höss's diary and, similarly, Arendt's arguments (which she develops on the basis of his account) show that even when citing facts, observers can (willingly or unwillingly) severely misrepresent the reality of the Sonderkommando prisoners and condemn their behavior. Such condemnations are often the result of an explicit (Höss) or underlying (Arendt) aversion to the Sonderkommando men and an unwillingness or inability to comprehend their plight in appropriate terms.

The starting point for a more differentiated examination of the moral aspects of the Sonderkommando prisoners' behavior should incorporate a perspective that is concurrently critical and empathetic. Many of the most severe critics of the Sonderkommando, such as Hannah Arendt, rarely attempt to consider the prisoners' plight from an empathetic point of view. Instead they denounce the Sonderkommando men *ab initio* and fail to fully grasp the intricate moral dilemma and the complexity of their situation.

QUALMS AND EFFORTS TO UNDERSTAND

In principle, one would expect the prisoners to have confronted in various ways the extreme and unique psychological distress that they encountered while working in the gas chambers and crematoria. In view of their extremely traumatic surroundings, one should also bear in mind that an individual prisoner's behavioral patterns, too, were far from stable and might have fluctuated substantially. Many witnesses described how the Sonderkommando prisoners "got used to" their terrible job over time. The SS were quite aware of this process of psychological adaptation and tried to initiate and culminate it as quickly as possible. Their purpose was to break the prisoners' strength and capacity for inner resistance from the moment they joined the Sonderkommando. Zalman Lewental explains:

> An important factor in the adaptation process was the fact that in the first days, [the SS] did not use inmate labor when the transports came in, as long as the people were alive . . . The commando would come in the morning and find the bunkers full of people who had been killed by the gas, and barracks full of used objects, but they never saw a living man.[141]

The psychological shock caused by this incessant confrontation with corpses must have triggered a process of mental numbing and hardening. When the prisoners began their work in the Sonderkommando, i.e. while they probably retained their capacity for moral doubt and inner resistance, they were consistently deprived of contact with victims who were still alive. This isolation is significant, especially considering that the moral dilemma for the Sonderkommando prisoners became most strongly apparent whenever they stood face to 'face with victims in the undressing room—living human beings for whom, at least theoretically, hope still existed. However, since the prisoners initially had been tasked exclusively with the removal of corpses from the gas chambers and the operation of the crematoria, they had been effectively deprived of any opportunity to maintain a residue of hope. They were forced to confront, day after day, the oppressive omnipresence of industrial-

style extermination and death. As a result, they became locked into a position of powerlessness that the SS could easily use to turn them into passive tools.

The intense initial traumatic shock quickly reduced most new "recruits" of the Sonderkommando to apathy. This mental and emotional hardening may be explained as a psychological defense mechanism—possibly the only way that the prisoners could retain their will to survive and a semblance of sanity among the piles of twisted and tangled corpses in the crematoria. Wolfgang Sofsky writes:

> Even in a situation of certain death, people frequently do not react with rebellion, but with apathy. One becomes indifferent to the environment; behavior turns mechanical. The protective armor of apathy permits habits to perform, and these habits bolster indifference towards one's own actions; they blunt perception and the sense of morality.[142]

Presumably, then, a person in an exceedingly traumatic environment tends to lose full awareness of his or her actions, and his or her capacity to act by volition becomes severely limited or, in extreme cases, vanishes altogether. The crematoria were such an environment. Thus, it became increasingly difficult for the Sonderkommando prisoners to guide their behavior in the light of previously held moral dictates. As a result, they should not be held fully accountable for their routinized actions.

Obviously, not every prisoner was equally affected by this process of passive surrender to the ghastly working routine in the gas chambers and crematoria. Only a few, however, could cope to any degree with this oppressive and traumatic everyday life. Lewental explains:

> . . . [B]ut there were few who were not ⟨affected⟩ and not carried away in the routine of adaptation, who did not permit this to become an everyday occurrence. Of course, certain elements among us, for example, the very orthodox rabbinical judge from Makow Maz[owiecki]—such refined people, who refused at any price to play the game of live-today-and-die-tomorrow, held on at any price. At first their influence was very little, simply because as small as their numbers were; the impression they made was even less, because they were not organized. They did not represent the standard mass, and were therefore swallowed up into the mob.[143]

Although adaptation was a fundamental aspect of prisoner behavior in the crematoria, it would seem insufficient to characterize the Sonderkommando solely in terms of indifference, passivity, and apathy. It is equally important to detect and highlight instances that demonstrate the existence of an active and

empathetic human being beneath the husk of the passive and routinized death factory worker.

The Auschwitz survivor Dawid Szmulewski, a member of the *Dachdecker-kommando* (roofing detail), aptly describes the diverse and contradictory behavior of Sonderkommando prisoners.

> The Sonderkommando is not a uniform element. There were those whose aims were limited to another plate of soup, a drink, an object purloined from the dead. Their senses had been dulled. These were primitive people; people who had become bestial. But there were also those who did not rest, but from the first day began to organize an insurrectionist movement. It is true that on the one side, members of the Sonderkommando assisted the SS in the performance of their terrible murder. But there was another side to the coin.[144]

Maria Jerzierska, a former Polish prisoner in Auschwitz, tries to do justice to the diverse characteristics of the Sonderkommando prisoners. While keeping in mind the general moral degradation that occurred among them, she describes their honorable deeds with special emphasis:

> What were the feelings which accompanied the Sonderkommando labourers at their task? I am unable to try to describe this. In any event, no small number of these people became notoriously wild in the course of their work; these thought of nothing but the saving of their own skin and their own pleasure, such as drinking to excess of alcoholic beverages brought with them by the condemned. Others became bestial; their senses were dulled and they became totally indifferent to their work. For evil does indeed engender evil. But the Germans did not succeed in corrupting them all. This can be attested by the living men who were saved through the aid of the Sonderkommando.[145]

Jerzierska mentions as an example the humanitarian aid that the people of the Sonderkommando provided for prisoners all over the camp. They clandestinely passed on such medicines as they could "organize" and thus saved many inmates' lives. In additional cases, members of the Sonderkommando helped other inmates to escape from the camp. In the spring of 1944, for instance, a group of Sonderkommando prisoners who supplied four Jewish inmates who subsequently managed to flee from the camp—Rudolf Vrba, Alfred Wetzler, Czeslaw Mordowicz, and Arnost Rosin—with secret lists of names, along with statistics and other evidence, to alert the world to the mass murder taking place in Auschwitz-Birkenau.[146]

In a manner similar to Jerzierska's empathetic questioning, the Polish for-

mer prisoner Maria Rychlik tries to point out the tragic aspects of the Sonderkommando prisoners and the human dimension of their behavior:

> The plight of the Jewish prisoners of the Sonderkommando, who had to assist with the extermination of their brothers—drunk, helpless and as if thunderstruck from their work—is a tragic one. Sometimes, they emerged from their lethargy and looked from afar to the women who were standing behind the fence and then threw various small objects towards them.[147]

Underlying all these considerations is the question about the realistic and practical extent of action that the Sonderkommando prisoners could take: "What could they have done?" Any empathetic answer to this question should touch the core of the dilemma of the prisoners in the crematoria. Once more, a commentary by Maria Jerzierska underscores the tragic plight of the Sonderkommando prisoners:

> For what could they have done? . . . Their attempts to rebel or protest would have been in vain and for naught. Even if they could have succeeded in momentarily saving someone from the hands of the SS, the entire area was surrounded with barbed wire fences, a ring of sentries, and beyond that—occupied Poland. The Germans enjoyed unlimited rule all over, and a Jewish physiognomy was tantamount to a sentence of death. . . . Free men become filled with anger when their peers refuse to take up arms in defense of their honor and their lives. But the men of the Sonderkommando were prisoners in the dreadful days of death and shame, in the huge death factory of Auschwitz. Do not hasten to judge.[148]

"DO NOT HASTEN TO JUDGE!"

Primo Levi dedicated most of his writing and thinking to issues regarding Auschwitz and did not flinch from dealing extensively with the Sonderkommando. Levi, himself an Auschwitz survivor, was an excellent observer with a great ability to point to relevant issues and describe clearly the main phenomena in the death camp. As mentioned, he presupposes that nobody, even a former Auschwitz inmate, has the right or the ability to judge the Sonderkommando. He explains that the extremely complicated moral quandary of the Sonderkommando prisoners rules out any evaluation of their behavior by conventional moral standards. Accordingly, Levi takes a very cautious approach and avoids rash conclusions. Although he clearly expresses his deep concern about questions of guilt and responsibility, ultimately he does not feel capable of unraveling the complex moral situation into which the Sonderkommando prisoners were thrust.

Levi's analysis eloquently unveils the actual intentions behind the establishment of the Sonderkommando. The SS created this labor detail in order to make the Jews into the Nazis' assistants. Arguably, the Sonderkommando was the Nazi murderers' most extreme attempt to corrupt their victims' consciences by forcing them to participate in their own destruction. Levi expresses this cruel aim, which he calls "National Socialism's most demonic crime," in appropriate terms.[149] Assuming the voice of the SS, he states:

> We, the master race, are your destroyers, but you are no better than we are; if we so wish, and we do so wish, we can destroy not only your bodies but also your souls, just as we have destroyed ours. . . . We have embraced you, corrupted you, dragged you to the bottom with us, you proud people: dirtied with your own blood, as we are. You too, like us and like Cain, have killed the brother.[150]

By accenting the intentions of the SS, Levi stresses his concern about the possible effects that working in the Sonderkommando could have had on the prisoners. Levi is profoundly troubled by questions such as why the prisoners did not show more inner resistance, why they did not revolt or prefer death instead of succumbing to the routine, and why they were dragged so quickly and unresistingly, it seemed, into this abyss of inhumanity that reigned in the gas chambers and crematoria.

Even a survivor like Levi, who had managed to retain his strength and humanity despite the terrible experiences he had undergone in Auschwitz, seems incapable of answering these disturbing questions satisfactorily. Levi notes several cases in which prisoners defied the SS and refused to work in the Sonderkommando (they were immediately gassed) and mentions the Sonderkommando uprising in October 1944. Despite these few sparks of hope, he remains fundamentally concerned about all those mentally broken prisoners who bowed to the fate that was forced upon them. The few instances of hope do not lessen Levi's worries about these "miserable manual labourers of the slaughter [. . .], who from one shift to the next preferred a few more weeks of life (what a life) to immediate death, but who in no instance induced themselves, or were induced to kill with their own hands."[151]

Levi states repeatedly, with emphasis, that the prisoners of the Sonderkommando did not commit any crimes directly. He also expresses his strong sympathy with these "miserable manual labourers of the mass extermination." Despite his forgiving attitude, however, he admits in agony that apathy turned many of the prisoners into passive tools in the actual murderers' hands. Levi assumes that the Sonderkommando prisoners' capacity to act as deliberate and self-conscious human beings must have been very badly eroded. Their will

to resist must have been broken so badly that they simply succumbed and bowed passively to their fate—a condition that he associates with Vercors's metaphor of the "death of the soul."[152]

As noted above, one may explain to some extent this mental shattering of a human being and the resulting apathy in terms of concepts such as "psychological defense mechanism." However, such attempts to rationalize the prisoners' condition still leave crucial questions unanswered—"convulsed questions," Levi writes, "for which one would be hard pressed to find an answer that reassures us about man's nature."[153]

Even Wolfgang Sofsky's sophisticated discussion of the moral problematics of the Sonderkommando does not answer these "convulsed questions" to a sufficiently reassuring degree. Sofsky bases his argumentation on the fact that the Sonderkommando prisoners had no alternative for action other than suicide. Such a situation, he concludes, does not allow for moral judgment:

> Moral judgments exist only when there is choice. Death (i.e. suicide), however, is not an alternative for action, as it eliminates all the conditions for further action. Martyrdom was no real alternative. The possibility of self-sacrifice, this highest act of morality, was precluded from the beginning. To kill oneself would not have saved a single human life.[154]

Sofsky's conclusion is certainly valid. Nevertheless, such attempts to rationalize the condition of the Sonderkommando may not eliminate our qualms and concerns about the prisoners' moral state. It seems that many people continue to wish, in line with Arendt's reasoning, that had fewer prisoners succumbed to the orders of the SS and instead refused to comply, the Nazi death machinery might have worked less smoothly. Still, the extremely passionate controversy about the character and role of the Sonderkommando shows that many such people still find it very difficult to free themselves fully of such desperate hope.

Sofsky goes even further, claiming that subjecting the Sonderkommando to moral judgment is actually meaningless rather than merely illegitimate. "Any moral deed," he writes, "is impossible where absolute evil has become an institution."[155] This postulation of the categorical impossibility of moral action in the context of the Sonderkommando seems a bit overstated. As the testimonies in this book show, the Sonderkommando prisoners had some room for moral action—even in the crematoria, where, according to Sofsky, evil had become an institution. However, one can accept Sofsky's argument as a warning that any attempt to grasp the moral dimension of the Sonderkommando phenomenon is fraught with extraordinary difficulties.

In this context, Primo Levi has every reason to remain fundamentally con-

cerned about the Sonderkommando prisoners' situation and the "spiritual welfare" of their souls. The many instances where prisoners' actions gave evidence of intact self-awareness and humanity are simply not persuasive and reassuring enough to sustain his overall assessment. Without calling into question Levi's very appropriate conclusion, one should nevertheless rectify his insufficient discussion of cases where prisoners displayed empathy and resistance (both mental and physical). Such an action may, in turn, create a necessary counternarrative to the underlying pessimism in Levi's account.

A more detailed look at the Sonderkommando uprising in October 1944, for example, would have apprised Levi of the lengthy preparation time and the large number of prisoners involved in planning resistance activities. Such an emphasis of "positive" aspects must not, of course, be allowed to distort the reality of widespread apathy and passivity among the Sonderkommando prisoners. However, greater detail in the depiction of these cases would certainly enhance the authenticity and balance of the overall representation of the Sonderkommando. Such counterbalancing of various behavioral aspects of the Sonderkommando prisoners may alleviate, to some degree, Levi's highly pessimistic general assessment of "man's nature." Ultimately, however, it cannot fully unravel (or dissipate) the intrinsic moral quandary of the Sonderkommando phenomenon.

An emphasis on acts of resistance by the Sonderkommando would also focus attention on general questions about the expectations and hopes for resistance among prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Survivors of the camp often speak in their testimonies about an especially high level of expectations of resistance by the Sonderkommando, saying that the Sonderkommando could have halted or at least sabotaged the killing of thousands of innocent Jews, especially since its members were closest to the killing installations and had better chances of obtaining munitions, guns, and so on. Such wishes for an end to the mass extermination reflect the deep frustration of the camp prisoners, who could only observe helplessly as thousands of innocent Jews were being brutally murdered.

Generally, comparisons between the situation of Sonderkommando prisoners and other prisoners in the camp are legitimate only to a very limited degree, if at all. A closer look at testimonies and case studies shows that the Sonderkommando prisoners indeed occupied a unique structural position within the camp.

First, they had no alternative other than to obey the orders of the SS. Other prisoner-functionaries could always step down and ask to be replaced; members of the Sonderkommando could only commit suicide in order to escape their moral dilemma. Chosen as *Geheimnisträger* (bearers of a secret), they

were doomed to work in their detail until they were killed as well—a demise that awaited them in any case, the prisoners knew.

Second, the Sonderkommando prisoners must have been under severe mental stress as they worked. Other prisoner-functionaries could at least rely on a certain "balance" in their daily lives, enduring the barbaric world of the camp, on the one hand, and being privileged to leave their barracks and meet and talk with other prisoners, on the other hand. Members of the Sonderkommando, in contrast, were totally isolated in the crematorium compound most of the time, constantly surrounded by corpses, ashes, and scenes of brutal murder and death.

Third, prisoner-functionaries in the camp dealt with people who were still alive. The only Sonderkommando members who did so were those who worked in the undressing room. At the most, they had fifteen to twenty minutes of contact with these victims before these were chased into the gas chambers. In all their other tasks, Sonderkommando prisoners encountered corpses only. Furthermore, the duties of other prisoner-functionaries were more or less related to "normal" aspects of everyday camp life, i.e. bureaucratic work, maintenance of discipline, forwarding orders, etc. In contrast, the Sonderkommando inhabited the very core of the Dantesque inferno, the fringes of the reality of camp life, which was totally perverted to begin with.

The following dialogue with a Sonderkommando prisoner, given by the Jewish author, poet, and Auschwitz survivor Krystyna Zywulska, further illustrates the absurdity of direct comparisons between the Sonderkommando and other prisoner groups in regard to the question of resistance:

> "Why don't you stage an uprising?" I dare to ask. "Why don't you resist or why don't you defend yourself?"
>
> "And why don't you organize an uprising? Only because your group sits in an office? How many are you, anyway? Sixty? And the thousands in the camps, why don't they rebel? . . . They know very well that at the first attempt to resist they would gun down all of us with machine guns. . . . And do you know at all how many resisted and went up there?" He raised his index finger: "You think the Sonderkommando people are terrible people . . . But I can assure you that they are human beings like all the others . . . only much less happy."[156]

The question about the responsibility and the imperative of resistance is relevant to all prisoner groups and not the Sonderkommando only. Considering how severely the prisoners in the crematoria were affected by their extremely traumatic environment, one doubts whether, and to what extent, the Sonderkommando had concrete collective responsibility for resistance at all.

At day's end, it is up to the observer to grant each prisoner in Auschwitz a personal breaking point, beyond which his will to resist ultimately fades and disappears—especially since in the end each prisoner was fully aware that any attempt to resist would result in certain death.

Primo Levi's conclusion about the limits of moral judgment in assessing other people's capacity for resistance in the face of such imminent existential danger seems very appropriate in this context. Here his argument about the Sonderkommando deserves to be quoted verbatim:

> Now nobody can know for how long and under what trials his soul can resist before yielding or breaking. Every human being possesses a reserve of strength whose extent is unknown to him, be it large, small, or nonexistent, and only through extreme adversity can we evaluate it. Even apart from the extreme case of the Special Squads [Sonderkommandos], often those of us who have returned, when we describe our vicissitudes, hear in response: "In your place I would not have lasted for a single day." This statement does not have a precise meaning: one is never in another's place. Each individual is so complex that there is no point in trying to foresee his behavior, all the more so in extreme situations; nor is it possible to foresee one's own behavior. Therefore I ask that we meditate on the story of "the crematorium ravens" [i.e., the members of the Sonderkommando] with pity and rigor, but that judgment of them should be suspended.[157]

Primo Levi's ruminations about the morality of the Sonderkommando are pervaded by fundamental concerns and uncertainties. Ultimately he avoids moral judgment and concludes that the case of the Sonderkommando is a *special* one (after all, the word Sonderkommando is German for "*special* detail") that simply defies evaluation by conventional moral standards. Nevertheless, Levi attempts to find a broad label for the phenomenon by coining the term "caso-limite di collaborazione" ("borderline of collaboration").[158] This expression expresses Levi's unresolved ambiguity about the Sonderkommando. "Borderline of collaboration" embraces both his messages—the unresolved concerns and the decision to eschew final judgment. However, Levi does not quite succeed in pointing out the intricate connotations of this label. Despite his explicit demand to suspend judgment, the word "collaboration" leaves a bitter aftertaste—unwittingly or not—and its use implies at least a subliminal judgmental attitude toward the Sonderkommando.

Levi's use of the term "collaboration" points at a central intrinsic problem in historical analyses of the Holocaust and, in particular, of the Sonderkommando. Descriptions of the Holocaust must resort to cautious and considerate language in order to do justice to the extraordinary circumstances at issue and,

especially, to avoid injustice to the victims and survivors. When issues related to concentration camps and mass extermination are at stake, even sophisticated inquiries often fall just short of appropriate descriptive rhetoric that can steer clear of problematic connotations. In extreme cases such as the Sonderkommando, it may even be impossible to approximate an adequate form of expression that might allow us to fathom the horror and the moral dilemma of the prisoners who worked in the crematoria. The Holocaust is a historical precedent that demands new standards and forms of evaluation and expression of its significance and meaning. This problematic basis of the Holocaust, however, also means that we must sometimes admit that our mental horizon may simply be too short to comprehend fully the extremity of the situation in which the Sonderkommando members were forced to live and die.

In other words, a moral discourse has certain boundaries that, if breached, will create the danger of doing injustice, albeit unintentional, to the victims of the Holocaust. The prime imperative in historical analyses of the Holocaust is to avoid causing the victims further injustice. This imperative corresponds to our aforementioned call for a basically empathetic stance in our efforts to cast camp life and the behavior of prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau into critical perspective. In regard to the historiography of the Sonderkommando in particular, we are duty-bound as observers to step back in some instances and admit that we cannot fully grasp and understand all aspects of this horrific story — even if this means that we will not be able to fathom all its aspects and moral dimensions. Thus, in accordance with Primo Levi's conclusion, our final judgment of the Sonderkommando prisoners should be "judgment suspended."

Former Members of the Sonderkommando after 1945

PUBLIC OPINION

Fifty years of scholarly research on the Holocaust have imposed a measure of anonymity on the history of the Sonderkommando, leaving this segment of history in the shadows, shrouding it in mystery, and excluding it from the sphere of public interest. The former members of the Sonderkommando were obscure for many years; few even knew that they were alive. Most of the public and even many experts believed that none of the Sonderkommando prisoners had survived. Concurrently, various rash opinions about the Sonderkommando and the nature of its members were disseminated. Thus, it is no wonder that prejudices appeared, too. Historical studies and publications after the Holocaust made only a very limited effort to describe and analyze the Sonderkommando. The current book is the first work that attempts to provide

a full picture of the activity and inner life of the Sonderkommando on the basis of interviews with former members of this labor detail.

There is a reason why the Sonderkommando issue was marginalized and almost forgotten in Israel. Many Holocaust survivors spent years hiding behind a veil of silence because their initial testimonies were greeted coldly and indifferently. Years passed before Israeli society matured and created conditions under which such matters could be understood. The former Sonderkommando members went through the same process.[159]

In the 1950s and the 1960s, in Israel and elsewhere, the dominant attitude toward Jews who had been forced to work for the Germans—such as members of *Judenräte* on the one hand, and block elders, Kapos, etc. on the other—was highly negative. Members of the Sonderkommando were included in this category. There was a general tendency to define these people as traitors and collaborators who looked out only for themselves, their families, and their close associates, and exposed others' lives to risk.

Thus, it is hardly surprising that the former Sonderkommando members were unwilling to admit that they had belonged to this controversial labor detail and preferred to conceal their past for as long as possible. They did not even share their horrifying experiences with their closest family members, their wives and children. Above all, they feared that they, like many former prisoners in ghettos and camps, would be accused of wrongdoing and forced to stand trial. In the postwar years, a number of Jews who had to serve the Germans were singled out in Israel, Poland, and other countries; some of them were charged and a few were actually prosecuted. Such trials sensitized public opinion to the grave problem of treason and collaboration. For this reason, former members of the Sonderkommando wished at all costs to avert confrontations with other survivors of Auschwitz. They usually led anonymous lives. No one ever tried to prosecute them or rip aside their veil.

The few prisoners who survived the Sonderkommando were not easy to approach. As noted, their very existence was widely disbelieved. Even during the Holocaust, it was rumored that such prisoners were allowed to live for three or four months at the most. The prisoners in Auschwitz, who were not allowed any contact with the Sonderkommando, treated this as the conventional wisdom. The Sonderkommando survivors remained in the shadows during the Eichmann trial as well. None of them took the witness stand and the topic was not brought up. Generally speaking, the prosecution did not mention the inner anguish that was associated with the horrors of the Holocaust; instead they concentrated on the Nazi murderers and the defendant's personality. Had they touched upon the Sonderkommando problem during

the Eichmann trial, the attention of everyone involved would have focused not only on the murderers but also on the victims. Therefore, one may easily understand why this step was not taken. Former members of the Sonderkommando, like other survivors, had to cope with the difficulties of routine life and making a living. Since reality forced them to expurgate the nightmares related to their past in the camp, their involvement in daily affairs gave them a convenient way to escape from troubling memories.

Everyone knows how hard it was for Holocaust survivors, especially those who had been in extermination camps, to rebuild their lives after the war. After they had lost everything, they had to create a new world on the soil of the very world that had banished them previously. It was no easy task.

These people needed tremendous psychological strength to rid themselves of the grief that had nested in them. They had not been allowed to display emotions in the ghetto or the camps. Many of them realized the immensity of their disaster only when they became free people again. For many of them, the discovery was a severe blow. For former prisoners in the Sonderkommando, who had experienced so many atrocities and had witnessed all phases of the "Final Solution to the Jewish Problem," the return to a free country and normal life was much more difficult. As if it were not enough that they had spent weeks, months, or years in the death factories and often had to cremate members of their own families, they had to cope after the war with a tide of suspicions and skepticism about their personal ordeals. Those who attempted to record their history were suspected of having taken leave of their senses. The witnesses' accounts that the author gathered for this book give clear indication of the many problems that the former Sonderkommando prisoners faced when they attempted to apprise relatives of the nature of their experiences. After encountering general disbelief, they preferred to retreat into silence. The wish to reestablish their lives was somewhat useful in blurring the memories of Auschwitz. For many, it was genuinely therapeutic. The need to acquire an occupation, establish a family, and attempt to heal the psychological wounds helped them, at least during the day, to stifle dismal thoughts about the horrors of the camp.

One reason that these men allowed the topic of the Sonderkommando to lie fallow was the wish to conceal the horrors from their children. Other survivors, too, kept silence for this reason.[160] All of this, however, does not imply that the memories of Auschwitz had simply vanished. Many survivors returned to the crematoria and the gas chambers in their dreams. For years their terrible nightmares burdened their lives and deprived their families, too, of serenity. Others sought solace in therapy or used other methods to rid them-

selves of the nightmares and allay the pangs of conscience that beset them since they had been forced to perform those ghastly labors in Auschwitz.

Ya'akov Silberberg, a baker, returned to the occupation that he had learned before the war in Plonsk. To avoid having to sleep at night, he always chose the night shift at the bakery where he worked. Yehoshua Rosenblum spent many years in Israel working for the religious burial society in Haifa. He probably chose this job because it gave him an opportunity to do something that he had not been allowed to do in the Sonderkommando: to honor the dead. Working for the burial society must have satisfied an inner need that had gone unrequited at the crematorium.

Due to the criticism and the general hostility toward Jews who had held functions in the ghettos and the camps, the former Sonderkommando members preferred to avoid all activities associated with public life. Only on very rare occasions, for short periods only, did they surrender their anonymity and take part in public trials against Nazi criminals. Immediately afterwards, they returned to the shadows.

SONDERKOMMANDO MEMBERS ON THE WITNESS STAND

The first former Sonderkommando members who testified against Nazi criminals were those who reported to the Soviet commissions that conducted investigations at liberated Auschwitz in February–March 1945. Szlama (Shlomo) Dragon, Henryk Tauber (Heniek Fuchsbrunner),[161] Stanislaw Jankowski (Alter Feinsilber),[162] and Henryk Mandelbaum gave such testimony. From March 1945 on, the issue of Nazi crimes in Auschwitz was handled by the Polish authorities, which established for this purpose the Central Commission for the Investigation of German Crimes in Poland (Glowna Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Polsce) and the Krakow District Commission for the Investigation of German War Crimes (Okregowa Komisja Badania Zbrodni Niemieckich w Krakowie). The Supreme National Tribunal (Najwyzszy Trybunal Narodowy) used as its principal evidentiary material the minutes recorded by Polish experts during their investigations at the former camp and the camp documents that they collected in the trials of Rudolf Höss and four members of the staff of the Auschwitz quarantine camp.[163] Former prisoners in the Sonderkommando, including Shlomo Dragon and Henryk Tauber, testified before this forum as well.[164]

Two French doctors who had belonged to the Sonderkommando, Dr. Sigismund Bendel and Dr. André Lettich,[165] testified at a trial of guards at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, conducted in Hagen, Germany, in 1947. Former members of the Sonderkommando, including Arnost Rosin,[166] were called to the witness stand at the 1947 trial of the former commander of

Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, in Warsaw. Similarly, Sonderkommando prisoners testified in trials of Auschwitz criminals that took place in Krakow that year.

Other former members of the Sonderkommando—Dov Paisikovic, Filip Müller, and Milton Buki—testified at the Auschwitz trial in Frankfurt (1963–1965) of twenty-four Nazi overseers who had served in Auschwitz. These prisoners had not given testimony about their work in the Sonderkommando before. They had been invited to testify before the jury in Frankfurt by the author and historian Hermann Langbein, himself a former prisoner in Auschwitz. Langbein was very helpful to the court in locating many former prisoners of Auschwitz, Jews as well as non-Jews.

In January 1972, two engineers, Walter Dejaco and Fritz Ertl—members of the SS who had worked for the camp construction office—were tried in Vienna. The two had been in charge of the construction of four crematoria in the Birkenau camp. In this case, Abraham and Shlomo Dragon testified in Israel in the presence of police officers and Milton Buki gave his testimony at the Israeli embassy in Brazil, where he was living at the time.[167]

The Sonderkommando in Literature and Film

HISTORICAL STUDIES AND PUBLICATIONS

For many years after the war, as noted, the Sonderkommando was not widely discussed and did not command special attention in historical studies and publications.

This, however, does not mean that the subject was totally ignored and that it never appeared in historical and general literature. It did surface, albeit without special emphasis and centrality. Careful analysis of published writings about Auschwitz shows that comprehensive research studies were under way but had not yet been completed. Unfortunately, many former Sonderkommando members who could have provided very many important details were no longer alive by the time this research activity began. Below the author attempts to summarize the published works in order to honor those who laid the foundations for research on the Sonderkommando, the experts from whom he learned so much and acquired so much knowledge.

The first researcher in this category is Erich Kulka, a former prisoner of Auschwitz, who spared no effort to obtain as much information and details about the Sonderkommando as possible. The first edition of his most important book on the history of Auschwitz[168] (co-authored with Ota Kraus) gave the Sonderkommando much attention. Kulka had the credentials to write a full scholarly study about the Sonderkommando, since he had been himself a

prisoner-functionary in Auschwitz and his personal relations with many important prisoners there—Jews and non-Jews—gave him considerable familiarity with the behind-the-scenes aspects of camp life.

From 1943 on, the resistance movement used the metal shop where Kulka worked, situated in Sector BIId of Birkenau, as a rendezvous point for clandestine meetings. The prisoners who met there tried to formulate a joint strategy for resistance to the SS men, but their attempts did not work out well and ended in a rift between the Jewish and the non-Jewish groups. In the aftermath of the dispute, the Sonderkommando prisoners decided to rely on themselves and act separately. While the secret meetings were taking place, Kulka established an especially close understanding with several members of the Sonderkommando, mainly Filip Müller.

Kulka's ardent interest in the history of the Sonderkommando traces to an additional factor: the painful disappointment he experienced after the unsuccessful attempt to rescue the prisoners in the "family camp," the section of the camp reserved for Jews from Theresienstadt.[169] Together, in conjunction with the Sonderkommando prisoners, they had prepared an uprising that would be headed by an extraordinary personality, the family camp prisoner Freddie Hirsch.

Due to the deaths of thousands of Czech Jews who were so dear to Kulka, as well as the powerlessness of the Sonderkommando prisoners, Kulka was disquieted for many years and wished to commemorate both the victims and their potential rescuers who had not been able to bring them deliverance. His intention was to publish an extensive and detailed study on the history of the Sonderkommando, with special emphasis on the resistance and uprising organization. He considered the organization a vastly important matter that marked the climax in the history of this exceptional labor detail. Kulka wished to give the uprising the place it deserved in history, and thereby to do justice with its participants, who had done something that was seemingly impossible in the inferno of Auschwitz.

To implement his plan, Kulka began to interview the few survivors, most of whom lived in Israel or the United States—Yehoshua Rosenblum, Ya'akov Gabai, Elimelech (Milton) Buki, Shlomo Dragon, and Daniel Bennahmias.[170] Kulka was especially interested in the group of prisoners who took part in smuggling explosives into the camp as laborers at the Union-Metallwerke. The gunpowder that they had smuggled was later used for the manufacture of hand grenades, bombs, and other materiel that would be employed in the planned uprising.

The interviews are of immense historical importance and provide an accurate picture of the lives of the Sonderkommando prisoners. In the mid-1980s,

after Hermann Langbein's book *Menschen in Auschwitz* appeared,[171] Kulka was one of the principal figures in the struggle to restore the breached dignity of the Sonderkommando prisoners.[172] In poor health and facing the need to cut back on the contents of the book considerably, Kulka died before he could publish his work on the heroism of the Sonderkommando men.

Another person who helped to enrich the documentation on the Sonderkommando was Ber Mark, the former director of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw. Mark devoted his last years to research on the Jewish resistance movement in Auschwitz and the Sonderkommando. The resistance and rebellion movement was a focal point of interest for him, as it was for Kulka. In the 1950s, Mark devoted one of his studies to the Warsaw ghetto uprising.[173] The results of his studies, some of which Mark wrote on his deathbed in Warsaw, were published posthumously by his wife, Esther, after she settled in Israel.

The book *The Scrolls of Auschwitz* contains lengthy excerpts of the secret writings of Zalman Gradowski, Zalman Lewental, and Lajb Langfus, as well as material on the Sonderkommando and the organization of the resistance movement in Auschwitz-Birkenau. A Polish edition featuring the secret writings was published by the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim. This volume also contains excerpts of texts by Chaim Herman and Marcel Nadjari and the testimony of Alter Feinsilber (known in the camp as Stanislaw Jankowski).[174]

Mark began to collect material on the Sonderkommando at a very early phase. Immediately after the war ended, he visited camps where former prisoners were staying and interviewed them. He put the interviews to considerable use in his subsequent work. Mark's studies were aided appreciably by interviews with survivors in Israel in the early 1960s by the historian Itzhak Alperowicz, who was then head of the interviews section at Yad Vashem.

The topic of the Sonderkommando surfaced in many additional publications—historical studies and former prisoners' memoirs—in Israel and other countries. One of the first books on Auschwitz was *People and Ash* by Israel Gutman.[175] It contains the personal reminiscences of the author, a member of the Jewish resistance movement in Auschwitz, and a group of comrades who had also managed to survive. In a chapter of the book titled "Witnesses' Accounts and Documents," Gutman presents excerpts of the secret writings of the Sonderkommando members. The book also features an introduction to the "Auschwitz Collection," historical material that had been gathered by the authors of the "secret writings" but was never discovered either because it had been lost or because the prisoners in question had not managed to bury it. In later years, excerpts of the testimonies of former Sonderkommando members

appeared in various journals and books, including a publication devoted to the Jewish community of Salonika[176] and the Hebrew-language journals *Pe'amim*[177] and *Edut*.[178] Since many Jews from Salonika worked in the Sonderkommando, a rather large quantity of material about the Sonderkommando is available in publications about that Jewish community. Examples are the book by Michael Molcho and Joseph Nechama about the extermination of Greek Jewry;[179] Yosef Ben's book about the struggle of the Greek Jews against the Nazis;[180] Shmuel Rephael's collection of testimonies by Greek Jews; an article by Danuta Czech, a Polish historian, about the Greek Jews in Auschwitz;[181] and a memorial book for Greek Jewry published by Yad Vashem.[182]

Quite a few Jews from various localities in Poland were also assigned to the Sonderkommando. Memorial publications about their communities place special emphasis on the anguish occasioned by the death of these prisoners, since nearly all of whom were murdered in the course of their work with this labor detail. An account of the Sonderkommando uprising in the Ciechanow memorial book[183] mentions Roza Robota of Ciechanow, the provider of explosives for the Sonderkommando uprising.

Many Sonderkommando prisoners came from Mlawa. The second volume of the memorial book for this community[184] presents much material on the history of this detail, including the testimony of Mordechai Halelli about the Zionist resistance movement in Auschwitz and the memoirs of Elimelech Skliar, which contain a great deal of detailed information. Shlomo Dragon's testimony appears in the memorial volume for the Zuromin community.[185]

INTERVIEWS AND DOCUMENTARY FILMS

Information about the Sonderkommando may also be culled from historical material on various Jewish communities in Poland (Ciechanow, Nowy Dwor, Makow Mazowiecki, Mlawa) and *Pinkas Hakehillot,* a monumental documentary project published by Yad Vashem.[186] Former members of this unit were rather reticent in allowing historians and museum personnel to interview them. Just the same, Yad Vashem managed to conduct interviews with Chazan, Sackar, and Dragon in the 1970s (the interviewer was Itzhak Alperowicz) and Erich Kulka conducted his aforementioned interviews in the 1980s.

The author of this book began his documentation project on the Sonderkommando in 1986, first in Israel and later in all other countries where former Sonderkommando members were living, including Greece, Italy, Poland, the Netherlands, the United States, and Canada. Several former Sonderkommando prisoners have taken part in documentary films over the past twenty years. Part of the BBC documentary series *A World at War,* produced in the

1970s, is devoted to the "Final Solution of the Jewish Problem" and includes an interview with Dov Paisikovic. A film called *Ein einfacher Mensch* (A simple man) by Karl Fruchtman, a well-known German-Jewish director (1985), tells the story of Ya'akov Silberberg, one of the former Sonderkommando prisoners, and of his wife, who also survived Auschwitz-Birkenau.

A lengthy and emotional interview with Filip Müller, one of the first members of the Sonderkommando, is included in Claude Lanzmann's monumental film *Shoah* (1985).[187] Shaul Chazan appeared in the television film *Saloniki-Auschwitz,* created by Arieh Agmon and based on the documentary radio program "Saloniki-Auschwitz" that the author of this volume produced for Israel Army Radio (Galey Zahal).

In the summer of 1993, the author initiated the production of a documentary film with the participation of six former Sonderkommando prisoners. The filming was done at the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau. This footage still awaits editing and final preparation for the screen.

Historians and researchers began to change their minds about the Sonderkommando issue roughly at the beginning of the eighties, and their shift in approach affected the attitude of public opinion toward the people whom the Nazis had selected during the war to perform various functions in the camps, including the *Judenräte*. The new frame of mind left room for greater sympathy and an effort to address the problem from a multifaceted perspective. People began to take account of special conditions and tragedies that pertained to compliance or noncompliance with the Germans' orders. They also admitted that under certain circumstances—i.e., from the perspective of the many years that had passed—one cannot properly judge the actions of individuals or groups during the Holocaust.

Another positive aspect of these changes, evident since the 1980s, is the emergence of the surviving Sonderkommando prisoners from "hiding." They stopped masking their identities and began to appear on radio shows, films, and even media interviews. However, it took Israeli society until the 1990s to mature sufficiently to analyze the phenomenon of the *Judenräte* and the Sonderkommando accurately, pertinently, and empathetically. The general change in attitude toward the actions of Jewish functionaries in the ghettos and the concentration and extermination camps also changed the public view of the Sonderkommando men. Thanks to detailed information about the Holocaust that has emerged over the years—memoirs, witnesses' accounts, books, and films—reactions such as rejection, condemnation, uncompromising criticism, and aloofness gave way to a correct understanding of the problem. Nevertheless, the testimonies of former Sonderkommando prisoners include expressions of fear that posterity will misjudge their work at the Auschwitz death

factory. It is precisely this that makes them so defensive. They often explain that they themselves were victims who had committed no crime. Hidden pangs of conscience that they developed during their term of labor at the crematoria may have affected them in this regard; one may even speculate that the subsequent public disapproval of their actions aggravated these pangs of conscience, from which they all suffered and which they were unable to change to the very end. To this day, some people still accuse the former Sonderkommando prisoners of being criminals who deserve prosecution. The author personally heard such remarks in Israel and in the United States in the year 2001.

THE LAST WITNESSES

It was due to the proliferation of post-Holocaust testimonies and the intensity of the traumatic experiences, in the main, that the Sonderkommando members did not find the inner serenity and the strength to produce a written account of their ordeals shortly after the events. Only four former members of this unit published memoirs: Marcel Nadjari, Leon Cohen, Filip Müller, and Miklos Nyiszli.

Marcel Nadjari was born in Salonika. He wrote his memoirs in 1947 but the book was published in Greek many years later.[188] Leon Cohen wrote his memoirs the same year; his book was published shortly afterwards in France. Select excerpts appeared in Hebrew in the journal *Pe'amim*[189] and an English edition of the memoirs came out in 1996.[190] Filip Müller's book, published in German and English,[191] is an important historical source, foremost because Müller was one of the first prisoners in the Sonderkommando and he served in it for a lengthy period of time. Müller's descriptions give us a better understanding of the terrible psychological ordeal that the Sonderkommando men actually experienced from the moment this labor detail was established:

> I was like hypnotized and obeyed each order implicitly. Fear of more blows, the ghastly sight of piled-up corpses, the biting smoke, the humming of fans and the flickering of flames, the whole infernal chaos had paralyzed my sense of orientation as well as my ability to think. It took some time before I began to realize that there were people lying there at my feet who had been killed only a short while before. But what I could not imagine was how so many people could have been killed at one time.
>
> [. . .] I now began to realize the dangerous position in which I found myself. At that moment I had only one chance to stay alive, even if only for a few hours or days. I had to convince Stark that I could do anything he

> expected from a crematorium worker. And thus I carried out all his orders like a robot.
>
> . . . My every thought, every fibre of my being, was concentrated on only one thing: to stay alive, one minute, one hour, one day, one week. But not to die. I was still young, after all. The memory of my parents, my family, and my early youth in my home town had faded. I was obsessed and dominated by the determination that I must not die. The heap of dead bodies which I had seen and which I was made to help remove only served to strengthen my determination to do everything possible not to perish in the same way; not to have to lie under a heap of dead bodies; not to be pushed into the oven, prodded with an iron fork and, ultimately, changed into smoke and ashes. Anything but that! I only wanted one thing: to go on living. Sometime, somehow, there might be a chance to get out of here. But if I wanted to survive there was only one thing: I must submit and carry out every single order. It was only by adopting this attitude that a man was able to carry on his ghastly trade in the crematorium of Auschwitz.[192]

There is some discrepancy between the English and the German versions of this book, evidently due to differences in the translation and editing of the English manuscript.[193] Subsequently, as noted, Müller testified in Lanzmann's classic film *Shoah*. His testimony was included in the film script which was published in various languages.[194] After appearing in Lanzmann's film, Müller's physical and mental condition deteriorated perceptibly and he no longer wished to take part in interviews or provide written replies to questions that were presented to him.

Miklos Nyiszli belonged to the Sonderkommando but was directly subordinate to Josef Mengele, not to the crematorium administration. He and three colleagues, the pathologist Adolf Fischer, Denes Greg, and Josef Kerner, made up the so-called *Sektionskommando*. These prisoners lived in the crematorium building. Nyiszli first published his book in 1947 in Debrecen, Hungary.[195] In 1960, it came out in English in New York under the title *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eye-Witness Account*. It reappeared in 1963 in a pocketbook version to which an autobiography of Nyiszli was added, and has been reprinted five times since then.[196] Nyiszli provides a wealth of detailed information about the Sonderkommando. Because he worked for Mengele, Nyiszli enjoyed freedom of movement on the camp premises, a great privilege relative to the entitlements of other prisoners in Auschwitz. The book includes a detailed account of the work of the Sonderkommando at all phases of the "assembly line" of the extermination process, from the arrival of the transport to the

scattering of the ashes. Furthermore, Nyiszli describes the atmosphere among the Sonderkommando members as they "worked," relations among members of the group, and their responses and forms of behavior:

> In all these death factories work was in full swing. From the Jewish unloading platform, which was divided into four large finger-like projections, similar to the delta of some flooded river, the victims spilled to their death with maniacal fury. Horrified, I noted with what order and robot like precision the murders were perpetrated, as if these factories were here for all eternity. If by chance I ever get out of this place alive, I thought, and have a chance to relate all I have see and lived through, who will believe me? Words, descriptions are quite incapable of furnishing anyone with an accurate picture of what goes on here. So my efforts to photograph in my mind all I see and engrave it in my memory are, after all, completely useless.
>
> With this discouraging thought running through my mind, I completed my first day's tour of the four crematoriums.[197]

Two additional diaries by purported members of the Sonderkommando are disputed and of problematic reliability. The first was written by Max Perkal, today of Philadelphia. One of the chapters of his book describes his work in the Sonderkommando. Ostensibly, he reached Auschwitz from the Pruzany ghetto on January 30, 1943, and was assigned to the Sonderkommando on March 18.[198] Perkal claims that he worked in the Sonderkommando for a short period of time—two weeks. However, his historically inaccurate and unconvincing descriptions make one doubt that he had ever belonged to the Auschwitz Sonderkommando.

The second book, written by Donald Watt of Sydney, Australia,[199] is titled *Stoker*.[200] Watt, like Perkal, claims that he was a member of the Sonderkommando and retells his work at the crematorium furnaces in Birkenau in two chapters in this book. The story is definitely an invention. When one reads the chapters attentively, one finds, based on various falsehoods and major errors, that Watt had not served in the Sonderkommando for even one day. The chapters about the Sonderkommando are based on falsifications and figments of the author's imagination. That a person would wish to impersonate a former prisoner in the Sonderkommando is mind-boggling. For this reason, a group headed by the Australian professor Konrad Kwiet, in conjunction with the Fritz-Bauer-Institut in Frankfurt am Main and its representative, Werner Renz, came into being to challenge the reliability of this book.

Those interested in the Sonderkommando prisoners should surely acquaint themselves with several additional studies and recorded testimonies. Hermann Langbein published several books about Auschwitz that include descriptions

of the lives and labors of the Sonderkommando.[201] His most important work is the two-volume *Der Auschwitz Prozess — Eine Dokumentation,* which contains excerpts of testimony from the trials in Frankfurt. In conjunction with Hans Adler and Ella Lingens-Reiner, Langbein published a book called *Auschwitz — Zeugnisse und Berichte,* in which Israel Gutman's article on the Sonderkommando uprising is reprinted.[202]

The author, Lore Shelley, a former prisoner in Auschwitz who now lives in San Francisco, wrote several books that contain testimonies of former prisoners in Auschwitz; these publications also provide material pertaining to our topic.[203]

It is generally believed that eighty of the hundred last members of the Sonderkommando — those who set out from the camp on the death march, amidst the other prisoners — were alive at the end of the war. By origin, 30 percent of the survivors were from Greece, 50 percent from Poland, 10 percent from Hungary, and the rest from the Netherlands, Czechoslovakia, and France.

At the present writing (2003), about twenty former members of the Sonderkommando are still alive — in Israel, in the United States and Canada, and in Italy, Germany, Poland, and Greece.

Eighteen former Sonderkommando prisoners are known to have lived in Israel. The following have died thus far: Moshe Wygnanski (who fell in Israel's War of Independence in 1948), Bernhard Sakel, Morris Schellekes, Dov Paisikovic, Elimelech (Milton) Buki, Ya'akov Gabai, Leon Cohen, Yehoshua Rosenblum, Moshe Weinkranz, Baruch Blum, and Shlomo Dragon. The following former members of the Sonderkommando are still alive in Israel: Abraham Dragon, Eliezer Eisenschmidt, Ya'akov Silberberg, Josef Sackar, Shaul Chazan, Lemke Pliszko, and Josef Weiss.

Some of the Sonderkommando prisoners who lived in Israel emigrated to other countries, including the United States. They include Lajzer Welbel, Yeshayahu Ehrlich, and Alexander Eisenbach.

Epilogue — the Tragedy of the Sonderkommando Prisoners

The tragedy of the Sonderkommando is composed of several interrelated factors.

First, the greatest disaster that befell the Jewish people unfolded before their eyes. Whether they wished it or not, they watched in anguish as the Jewish masses set out on their walk to the gas chambers and could not but observe, and then avert their gaze from, the annihilation of the Jewish people. The continual spectacle of extinction and extermination, in a tide that never receded, must have driven these people to a state of bottomless despair.

Second, the Nazis forced the Sonderkommando prisoners to help them to carry out their brutal crime, the mass murder of their people—old and young, men and women, toddlers and infants—in crematoria and provisional extermination facilities. Any task such as this could shatter an individual's psychological equilibrium. What is more, the members of this labor detail were also required to obfuscate all traces of the crimes that had been committed.

Third, the Sonderkommando prisoners were not allowed to grieve for their people and their own loved ones, whose bodies they had to stuff into the furnaces with their own hands. Nor could they pause for a moment to lament the victims' passing or even to spend a moment alone with them in an act of final parting. Instead, they had to remain indifferent and insensitive to the sanctity of body and soul. The Nazis deprived them of the natural human right to weep, to mourn the death of their nation and their families, and, as Jews, to recite Kaddish for the ascent to heaven of the souls of those who had been so dear to them.

Hence the title of this book. The choice of words is by no means random: Ya'akov Gabai chose them when he attempted to explain to the author why the Sonderkommando prisoners' tears "dried up." Gabai was not the only member of this labor detail who explained how hard it was to weep in the gas chambers and the crematorium halls. Decades before my interview with Gabai, Zalman Gradowski, in the secret writings that he buried in the soil of Birkenau, wrote that it was impossible to weep and allow tears to flow freely:

> Even now, here in my hell, I cannot weep at all, because every day I drown in a sea, a sea of blood. One wave rises over the other. Not for a moment can you retreat into a corner of your own and sit down there to weep, to weep over the devastation. The continual systematic death, the only life of everyone who lives here, deafens, confuses, and dulls your senses. You cannot feel, sense even the greatest sufferings. The personal destruction is swallowed up in the general one. And sometimes the heart is torn, the soul is riven—why am I sitting here quietly instead of lamenting, weeping over my tragedy, and why instead are we frozen, numb, drained of all emotion? Sometimes I hope, occasionally I console myself, that a time will arrive, a day will come, when I will have the privilege of being able to weep—but who knows. . . . So now what I want—it is my only wish—is that if I cannot bemoan them, then a stranger's eye will shed a tear for my dear ones.[204]

A sadness that is not consummated in tears, a terrible state of loneliness, and a sense that the surrounding world had severed contact, disengaged, and refused to know and acknowledge the reality in which they were living—these

are the feelings that stalked the Sonderkommando men. They ached for an awakening of the world's conscience and for deliverance:

> The lift ascends and descends, carrying innumerable victims as in a huge slaughterhouse. Now the people lie there in heaps, waiting their turn to be taken.
>
> Thirty mouths of hell now burn in the two large buildings and swallow up innumerable victims. In a little while, five thousand human beings, five thousand worlds, will be consumed by those flames.
>
> The furnaces burn like waves in a storm. The fire was ignited long ago by the world's barbarians and murderers, who hope to banish the darkness of their cruel world by its light.
>
> The fire burns boldly and placidly. No one disturbs it; no one extinguishes it. It continually receives countless victims, as if the ancient afflicted holy people was born especially for this purpose.
>
> Will you, the great free world, ever notice that great flame? Will you, man, ever stay at dusk to stand where you are and lift your eyes toward the deep blue heavens, which are covered in flames? So that you will know, man, you free man, that this is the fire of hell, in which people burn continually here? Perhaps your heart will once be warmed by their fire and your ice-cold hands will once come here and extinguish it, this fire. Perhaps then your heart will muster boldness and courage and you will exchange the victims who are being brought to this fire, this hell, which will stay here to burn forever—and those who kindled it will be consumed in its flames.[205]

The Sonderkommando members themselves were aware of their tragic function and the moral significance of their role in the overall process. They did not cower behind a wall of indifference and equanimity. After all:

> The plan was worked out to the last of its painstaking military details. We, the wretched victims of our people, were mobilized to serve at the front of the struggle, against our own brothers and sisters, our very selves, our very flesh. Ours is to be the first line, on which the victims may fling themselves, and behind our backs stand the "heroes and fighters for the [great] power" with machine guns, hand grenades, and rifles—whence they shoot them.[. . .]
>
> In a little while we will be witnesses, with our own Jewish eyes. We will have to observe our own destruction and see how five thousand human beings, five thousand Jews, five thousand strong, vibrant, budding lives, of women and children, husbands, infants, and the elderly, people irrespective of sex and age, how under the pressure of the accursed criminals, with the

> participation of the rifle, the hand grenade, and the machine gun, and with the assistance of their eternal partner, the enflamed savage dog, with his four legs, will immediately pursue, shove, and beat them murderously to confuse and abuse them, and how they will race willy-nilly into the arms of death.
>
> What is more, we their brethren, their very selves and flesh, will have to assist in this, to help remove them from the trucks, lead them into the bunker, and help them undress until they are as naked as on the day they were born. And then to help escort them, absolutely ready, to help escort them into a bunker—into the grave—of death.[206]

Fourth, each member of the Sonderkommando knew that his fate was sealed from the moment he had been selected for this duty. As a *Geheimnisträger* (bearer of a secret), he was fated to die. Thus, these prisoners lived on "death row," waiting for the ax to fall but not knowing when. During that very same time, they had to continue performing the most horrific duties ever imposed on any human being.

Fifth, apart from having to participate in industrial-scale murder, the Sonderkommando men were thrust into a tragic paradox. It was in their unconscious interest that as many Jewish transports as possible arrive, since any slowdown in the pace of arrivals, let alone the termination of labor at the "death factory," posed an existential threat to them. Their right to live hinged on the continued inflow of transports.

2

Josef Sackar: "To Survive, so the Truth Would Come Out"

When I first met Josef Sackar—a short, withered man of fragile physique and sensitive soul—in 1985, I was stunned. How could such a person have endured the suffering? Was I really facing a survivor of Auschwitz-Birkenau? What was his secret?

I have not solved the riddle fully to this day. There is no doubt that Josef Sackar—the first Sonderkommando survivor whom I got to know personally—is everlasting proof that not only the strong survived. Every Holocaust survivor has his own (or her own) rescue story.

Josef Sackar and his wife, Bella, have established a warm home in Israel. Everyone who visits immediately senses the gracious and homey atmosphere that pervades the place. The members of the household greet guests without false affectations; the Holocaust does not hover over their heads. True joie de vivre permeates the house. The Sackars' children, Penina and Yehoshua, were born into an atmosphere of simplicity, security, and abundant love. A cohesive family.

Even when Josef Sackar acceded to my request by describing the horrific work he had done in the camp, he continued to smile amiably, as if he were talking about other places and other times. Not even once as we conversed did he shed a tear or lower his gaze. He just tried to explain. As a matter of fact, none of the witnesses burst into tears when they discussed their experiences

with me. Did they cry at night, I wondered, or had their tears long since evaporated? Josef Sackar himself answered this question in one of our interview sessions: the ocean of tears had already dried up in Auschwitz, he said. There, weeping could no longer express the feelings of bereavement and fury over the murder of an entire people.

After each of our recorded conversations, Josef Sackar asked for a copy of the cassette. "It's not for me but for the children, so that they'll know," he explained. In 1983, when I made preparations for my documentary film about the Sonderkommando, I invited him to join me on a visit to Auschwitz to take part in the filming. He accepted the invitation without flinching and brought his wife and children as well.

Two main events that occurred during the filming remain in my memory. First, as we spent some time in the undressing hall, I asked him if he had played a part in deceiving the men and women who had reached this place by telling them that they were about to enter a shower hall and disinfection room. My purpose in asking him this question was to indicate the moral dilemma facing the Sonderkommando prisoners and to emphasize the ghastly reality in which they were mired.

He reacted with great agitation. Never had I seen him so enraged. "Didn't you know that the Germans gave precise orders about what to say and when to say it—and that disobedience could cost you your life?" he asked.

Later on, I felt that I had done him an injustice. I still feel this way. Forgive me, Josef!

The second event occurred between Josef Sackar and Shaul Chazan during a filming session in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which was to be included in my documentary film on the Sonderkommando. In the yard of Crematorium II [III],[1] the two of them suddenly got into a tumultuous argument about something that had happened in their distant past, when they had been prisoners at Auschwitz. Without delving into the details of the debate, I inferred from the very occurrence of the altercation how intimately the lives of the Sonderkommando prisoners were riddled with disputes accentuated by tremendous tension and anxieties, and how much the struggle for physical and psychological survival had percolated into their daily reality.

Josef Sackar won his battle. He left Birkenau with few scars. The tattooed prisoner number on his left forearm will remain with him forever. The number, however, is imprinted only in his skin and not in his psyche. The next generation has already been born, and so has the generation after. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren will tell about the old man who survived more than ten months in hell on earth without being dehumanized.

Mr. Sackar, tell me a little bit about your youth.

I was born in Arta, Greece, in 1924,[2] and I was raised there, too. There were about two hundred Jewish families in Arta, divided into two communities. There were two rabbis—one young, one older. There were two synagogues in town, where we went to services every day. More people came to services on Shabbat than on weekdays. We also had a *mohel* [performer of ritual circumcision] and a Jewish school that went up to sixth grade. I attended that school until the end of fourth grade, and afterwards I went over to the Greeks' school until the Germans came and arrested us on March 24, 1944. Our lives were absolutely normal, everything was quiet and calm, as it was in all places that had Greek populations.

What did the Jews in Arta do for a living?

The Jews in our town were merchants, but some were also artisans such as smiths, shoemakers, and so on.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father was a textile merchant. Every Sunday he traveled to the outskirts of town, twelve kilometers away, and didn't come home until Friday afternoon.

Did your mother work?

My mother was a housewife.

How many brothers and sisters did you have?

There were four of us, three girls and me. Two of my sisters and I were arrested by the Germans and sent to Birkenau. My older sister and her husband, who lived in another town, managed to go into hiding in the countryside and that's how they survived. Thank God, all four of us survived and are living in Israel today.

What kinds of relations were there between the Jews and the Greeks?

Relations were good, and during the German occupation, when the Jews looked for hiding places in the villages and mountains, the local people helped them.

Does that mean that the Jews didn't sense any anti-Semitism?

That's right. To the very end we didn't sense any anti-Semitism.

Is it fair to say that you lived peaceful, quiet lives until the war broke out?

Yes, and in the months after the war broke out, too, until the Germans came to Greece.

Could you sense that something had changed after the war began?

Nothing changed, because the Italians came first. We did business with the Italians and had no problems at all. The Italians were very humane and friendly toward us. During the Italian occupation, we were totally free; no one kept us from living any way we wanted. There were no restrictions on move-

ment and we needed no special documents or permits. When the Germans came, too, there were no hardships at first. You could say that the community continued to live normally in the first stage.

Did the Germans place restrictions on the Jewish population later on?

After the Germans arrived, things gradually changed. We had to get permits whenever we wanted to go out of town, and little by little our movements were restricted.

Did the Jews continue to live in their own homes?

Yes, no one lost their homes. We stayed in our apartments and houses. At first the Germans were rather decent. There were no untoward incidents, like breaking into Jewish shops to take merchandise without paying for it. That didn't happen.

This state of affairs lasted for about a month. What happened afterwards?

About a month later some of the Jews left Arta for the mountains, hoping to find hideouts there. Two of my sisters and I were among the ones who fled. The young people ran away; the old people remained at home. My father was disabled, paralyzed; he couldn't be moved from place to place. After we spent a month hiding in a village, we realized that it couldn't go on and we returned to the family home.

Why did you flee?

We were scared. There were rumors that the Germans might make problems for the Jews.

Did partisans who could help you begin to organize at that time?

Some people organized. I don't know if you could call them partisans, but it was clear that they were activists of some kind and that they had been there since the Italian occupation. Only a few people from our town joined their ranks. The problems began when the Germans ordered the chairman of our *kehilla* [Jewish community administration] to hand over a list of Jews.

When did this happen?

In late 1943, right after the Italian occupation collapsed. A month later, they told the chairman of the *kehilla* to hand over a list of Jews.

Did the Germans explain why they needed the list?

They just wanted a list of all the Jews and their addresses. I think it was for a census because Arta didn't have a population registration as Athens did.

Did you know what the lists were used for?

We didn't know anything. There were rumors that we were going to be rounded up and moved into a sealed ghetto, but nothing special happened until the last moment.

Did you know what the Jews in Europe—in Russia or Poland—were going through?

We didn't know and we hadn't heard a thing. We only heard that they were placing restrictions on the Jews and not allowing them to move freely in the cities. But we had heard nothing about the camps.

Were you able to obtain enough food, or were there problems in this respect?

There was no shortage of food because we were surrounded by villages where we could get almost everything—bread, corn, wheat, vegetables, everything we needed.

How long did this state of affairs last?

Until March 24, 1944.[3] That night, the Germans suddenly came and began to take everyone away, without exception, on the basis of their lists. We were arrested and taken to the cinema. They held us there for about two days. Afterwards, they loaded us onto trucks and drove us to Agrinion.[4] They kept us there for a few days. There Greek collaborators took all our money, all our jewelry and valuables. From there we reached Patras (Patrai) by sea,[5] and afterwards Athens, the Haidar (Haidari) camp.[6] It had once been a Greek army camp or a prison; I don't remember exactly. We stayed there until April 2, 1944. Additional Jews came from Preveza[7] and Athens. Finally, on April 3, 1944, they took us to Auschwitz in a transport of freight cars. The Red Cross gave us food for the trip and some other useful things.

Please describe the trip.

We went in cattle cars, packed in horribly, under disgraceful conditions. There wasn't enough food. As the train crossed Bulgaria, the Bulgarians threw bread and other food into the cars for us, but the Germans threw it back.

Were you together with your family?

I was with two of my sisters and my parents.

Did you know that the train was heading for Auschwitz?

We didn't know a thing. They told us that we were going to a labor camp. No one knew a thing; no one gave us information.

Do you remember what day you reached Auschwitz?

I reached Auschwitz precisely on the eve of Passover, April 14, 1944.

Do remember what time of day it was?

Just before nightfall.

What did you experience during your first moments in Auschwitz?

After the cars were opened simultaneously, we were ordered to get out fast. We left the train. My sisters propped up my mother; I took my father, who was paralyzed and couldn't walk. Then someone came over to me and said, "You shouldn't go with him, you'd better not go with him."[8] As he talked, he grabbed me and tore me away from my father. They dragged Father away and tossed him onto a truck, like a dog.

Were you able to see all this?

I saw it with my own eyes.

Did he call out to you? Did he shout?

What could he call to me by then? He was almost seventy.

Was your mother there, too?

Yes, Mother was there, too, but after we got out of the train, I didn't see her again.

What happened then?

Shortly after we left the train, the *Selektion* began.[9] They sent our parents to one side and my two sisters and me to the other side. My sisters and I were selected for labor. The rest of them, I think, were incinerated that very day. Another transport from Ioannina,[10] Trikala,[11] and Volos[12] arrived together with ours. That transport was also brought to Auschwitz first. After the selection, they took them to Birkenau, where they were incinerated that very day.

We were still on the platform and they separated the men from the women. They put the men through another selection and led us on foot to Birkenau, three and a half kilometers, to the shower rooms. Before we entered the showers, they tattooed a number onto each man's forearm. My number was 182739. After they shaved our bodies from head to toe, they took us to the quarantine.

You remember your number by heart to this day.

Sure, in German and Hebrew: one hundred eighty-two thousand seven hundred thirty-nine. That was my new name there.

Did they call you by your name?

No, we were nameless. We had nothing.

What happened next?

From there we were taken to quarantine, Camp BIIa.[13] We stayed there for three weeks.

Did you know in the course of that month what was happening in the camp? Did you see what was happening?

We saw nothing . . . We couldn't see . . . We were kept in a quarantine barracks and we didn't see a thing.

When were you selected for work in the Sonderkommando?

One evening, when the first transports from Hungary arrived, they did another *Selektion* and between 200 and 220 Greeks were removed from our transport. They led us to special barracks—they called them Blocks—numbers 11 and 13, if I'm not mistaken. No one was allowed to leave these two barracks or talk with anyone else in the camp. I came to Block 13, and there we were divided up into crematoria.

Do you remember who conducted the Selektion for the Sonderkommando?

It seems to me that it was an SS man. They didn't tell us why they were doing

the selection. They chose us on the basis of our appearance. We were each asked about our occupations and that's how the choice was made.

Were other Greek Jews in the quarantine block chosen for the Sonderkommando?

Sure. Sadly, they're no longer alive. Among the Jews who survived, I remember the Gabai brothers,[14] Shaul Chazan,[15] the Venezia brothers[16] — one of them is living in Italy now, the other is in America — and the late Leon Cohen.[17]

Did you know when you reached Block 13 that you were going to be assigned to the Sonderkommando?

They didn't tell us until we reached the block.

Who told you?

The older prisoners. There were many of them. They told us that we wouldn't lack a thing, that we'd receive everything, food, and so on, but they added that the work was hard.

Did you know what kind of work it would be?

Not exactly, but it didn't take me long to figure it out.

Do you remember your first day of work in the Sonderkommando?

I remember it very well. We were in Camp D,[18] and one evening we were taken behind the last crematorium building. There I saw the most horrific thing I'd ever seen in my whole life. A small transport had arrived that evening. They didn't order us to work; they just took us there so we'd get used to the sight of it. They'd dug some pits out there; they called them "bunkers."[19] The bodies were taken from the gas chambers and cremated there. They took the bodies to these bunkers, tossed them in, and burned them.

How? What fuel did they use for the fire?

Wood and other flammable materials. They lit the wood and burned the bodies.

Were these the bunkers that were used in the previous period in Birkenau?

When I was there, they began to use the bunkers again when the Jews from Hungary arrived. There was no room left in the crematorium furnaces then, so they went back to using the bunkers.

Did you work at the bunkers?

I saw how one bunker worked but I didn't work there.

Can you describe the bunker?

Yes. It was a pit, not very large, where they brought the bodies and threw them in. The pits were deep and they scattered pieces of wood at the bottom. The bodies were brought from the gas chambers to the pits, where they threw them in. All the pits were outdoors, under the stars. There were quite a few of them, where they burned bodies.

And did you just look at first?

Yes, I just looked.

Do you recall how you reacted?

How did I react? I was confused. I thought I was going insane. I told myself, "This is the end." Even so, I had to recover quickly and I told myself, "We have to get out of here alive." That's how I felt. I went with the feeling that I'd get out of there alive.

Did you think that way from the very beginning?

From the first day, when I came to Birkenau, I knew that I'd get out of there alive.

How could you know that?

Some kind of intuition, I guess.

What happened after that evening?

I was taken to Crematorium III [IV] right away. I was forced to work there for a few days.

Are you willing to describe your first evening as a worker of the Sonderkommando in Crematorium III [IV]?

At first we didn't see anything special. Then they took us to the closed door of the gas chamber, and when the door was opened they shouted at us, "Come here, take the bodies and throw them into the furnaces!"

Do you remember what you felt?

I remember it well. You can't forget that. Something like that is unforgettable—hundreds of corpses.

Did you think you were dreaming?

No, I didn't think I was dreaming. I believed what my eyes saw. The bodies had to be dragged out. How could we touch them with our hands? They were a terrible mass of flesh.

Did you, too, take part in removing the bodies?

Yes, me, too. We all removed bodies.

Did you think about who these dead people had been? Did you know who they had been?

People. Jews. We knew they were Jews. We knew that all the Jews were doomed to death, but I always went about with the feeling that I'd get out of it alive. Always.

On your first day at the crematorium, did you think about escaping?

No, no, it was absolutely impossible.

Why?

There was nowhere we could escape to. They would have shot us then and there.

Did you work there for long?

After we worked in Crematorium III [IV] for three days, they sent each of us

to work somewhere else. I was sent to Crematorium II [III], where I stayed until the end. We went to the crematorium and came back toward evening. When a series of transports from Hungary came, we had to live at the crematorium and stay there all the time. We lived upstairs, over the crematorium.

What did Crematorium II [III] look like?

It was surrounded with a fence of sorts, made from piles of logs, two meters high, so that you wouldn't notice a thing from the outside. Around the crematorium was an electric fence. There was an entrance that led to a large yard. The yard was about twenty meters long and it led to the building where the furnaces were. We led the victims to the left side, where there were stairs, and then down to the undressing hall. Over the undressing hall there was no other floor.[20] There were just four openings, through which the SS men threw in the gas in order to kill the people. To keep air from coming in, they would close the lids above the openings. On the right-hand side, at the entrance to the incineration works, there were also stairs, but they led up to the living quarters of the Sonderkommando prisoners. Next to the corner of the undressing hall and the gas chamber, there were two floors—the furnaces downstairs and the living quarters upstairs. A tall chimney, at least twenty meters high, rose from the roof of the building.[21] The smoke billowed through it.

What color was the building?

Red. Red bricks.

In other words, from the outside there was nothing suspicious about the building.

No, it looked like an ordinary factory. There was nothing unusual about it. A simple building.

Did it have windows?

The rooms of the living quarters had windows.

Was it possible to open the windows?

Yes.

What did the yard look like? Can you describe it?

After you got past the fence, there was a yard on the left and the right—like the courtyard of a villa, which is also surrounded by a yard. There were open pits on the sides. That's where we dumped the ashes after the cremation. The yard was large enough to have room for quite a few pits, where we dumped all the ashes. Later on, they gave an order to remove all the ashes from the pits and scatter them in the river.[22] Grass didn't grow in the yard; flowers and trees didn't grow. Only around the fence were there trees.

Was the yard illuminated?

There were powerful searchlights around the fence.

How did the people move from the trains to the crematorium?

When we, the Greeks, worked there, the trains with the transports reached Birkenau and went straight to the crematorium. Crematoria I [II] and II [III] were there, and Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] were added afterwards. There were also bunkers, the pits. Crematoria I [II] and II [III] were opposite each other, and the trains came straight to the open area.[23] They took the people off at once, made the *Selektion*, and led them to the crematorium, sometimes to number I [II], sometimes to number II [III]. It depended on which of them was available at the time.

After the Selektion, who led the people to the crematorium?

The Germans, only the Germans. The same with us: when we reached Auschwitz and got off the train, we were taken by the Germans on foot to the Birkenau camp. The ones who were selected for the furnaces were also escorted by Germans.

There were old people there, seventy years old, seventy-five, sick and crippled. They couldn't march. They were loaded onto a truck and afterwards thrown out like garbage.

When the people entered the crematorium compound, they first crossed a yard, am I right?

Yes.

Did somebody speak to them there?

The SS men. They told them to turn left and led them to the stairs that went down to the undressing hall.

Did they post a guard at the door so that no one would escape from the undressing hall?

Where could they escape to? There was nowhere they could escape. On top of that, they were in unfamiliar surroundings.

After all, the people had to go down a flight of stairs.

Yes.

Wasn't there somewhere they could slip away before they went to the cellar?

Let's assume that it was possible. But where could they escape? Everything was fenced in!

Can you describe the entrance?

It looked like a staircase. From the ground floor, they went down a wide set of stairs. There was a door that could be closed.

Did they all go down together?

Definitely not. The room wasn't large enough for a thousand people to undress all at once.

So how was it done?

They marched in a long line, in ranks of three or five. They went down the stairs, undressed, and moved on; downstairs, undress, onward.

Where was "onward"?

The gas chamber.

How many people went down in one go?

Only some of them each time. They didn't close the door. The door always stayed open when people came.

How many went in the first time?

Well, it's easy to figure out: the stairs were five meters wide, so how many? Six people? Each time six people went down and six went in, one after another, in turn.

After they undressed, they walked toward the gas chamber and others entered the undressing hall. Doesn't this mean that the entire transport went in?

No, not at all. Not everyone went in at once. It took time.

Who set the pace? Who said, "It's your turn now"?

They just didn't wait. The whole business, leading two thousand people to the gas chamber, took about an hour, no more. That's how long it took to put them in the gas chamber.

The last in line waited for more than an hour?

Yes, it depended on the size of the transport.

Did they come alone, or did someone escort them?

The Germans brought them, rank by rank like a parade, in ranks of three or five.

Did the Germans march in front of the group, behind it, or in the middle? How did it work?

Germans with rifles were posted to the sides. The Germans marched as far as the stairs, waited there, and gave the order to go down.

By the time the people went downstairs, had the Germans gone away?

There were a few Germans downstairs, but more Germans stood on the stairs and forced the people to go down.

Where were the others while this was happening? Some people had not yet reached the undressing hall. Where did they wait?

Upstairs, outside, lined up. For a whole hour they went down slowly, rank by rank. They undressed in the undressing hall and went on to the gas chamber. The undressing hall was a passageway of sorts.

When it snowed, did people also wait on the stairs?

They waited upstairs in all kinds of weather—snow, rain, or sleet. They went down slowly.

What was your function there?

As soon as a transport came, we had to report to the undressing hall. The Germans ordered us to tell them to undress and to lead them to the "showers." But that wasn't what awaited them. That was our work there. The gas cham-

ber was next to the undressing hall; it looked like a shower. After the people finished undressing and the Germans went away, they were gassed to death.

Where were you most of the time—outside the undressing hall or inside?

I was in the undressing hall of Crematorium II [III]. There the people who had come were told, "Now you have to shower and get disinfected." And we asked them to undress.

Did you order people to do this?

What choice did I have? That was my job. Young people, old people, children, babies—they all got undressed, and it was our job to lead them to the "showers." After they reached the gas chamber, the SS men threw the gas in.

Where were you when the people entered the gas chamber? Were you already in the undressing hall or did you go there only after they were already inside?

I was already downstairs, in the cellar, in the undressing hall. The SS men led them down the stairs and the Sonderkommando people waited for them downstairs.

Where did you stand while the people undressed?

In the middle of the room. Roughly in the middle of the room, sometimes in the middle, sometimes in the front, at the entrance, sometimes behind. I had to supervise.

What did it depend on?

It wasn't a permanent posting. Everyone looked for a place to stand.

How many Sonderkommando men were in the hall when the people came in?

There were ten or twenty of us in the room. We had to calm the people down, tell them to undress quickly, and lead them to the camouflaged showers.

How long did it take the people to undress?

About half an hour, sometimes a whole hour, between fifteen hundred and two thousand people!

Did you help them as they undressed?

Sometimes there were old people who needed help. Yes, we helped whenever we could.

Did they know that you were working there?

Sure they knew. After all, we'd ordered them to undress. It was clear to them that we were working there.

In what language did you speak to the people?

I learned to speak a little Yiddish or German there. I understood Yiddish well.

Did the people obey the instructions?

What choice did they have? They had to obey.

How did you know that a transport had come? Who told you?

We received reports. The SS men told the Kapo[24] and the Kapo told us by means of the foremen [*Vorarbeiter*].

What was the foreman's job?

He was in charge of a small part of our group; the Kapo was in charge of all of them.

Were you told from what country the Jews had come?

No, they didn't tell us where they came from, but for some time they came only from the ghettos. Entire families came from most of the ghettos. When the Germans sensed that things were about to end, they began to liquidate the ghettos. For quite a while the transports came from Hungary. That happened in the last few months.

Can you describe the undressing hall in detail? What was its shape?

Like a passageway, like a long corridor.

Do you remember its dimensions?

At least fifty to eighty meters. Those were roughly the dimensions, if I'm not mistaken. It was about two and a half to three meters high. It was an underground chamber.

Was the floor tiled?

No, the floor was concrete. There were benches on both sides of the room and there were hooks on the walls where the people hung their things.

Were the benches made of wood?

The benches were made of wood and so were the hooks. Everything was made of pine wood, like in a dressing room. The benches ran the full length of the room, that is, everyone had room to sit down while they undressed.

Did each hook have a number?

Yes, but there were only enough hooks for 100 to 150 people.

So what did the people do?

They threw their clothes on the floor in piles, all thrown together.

Did they get into arguments because of this?

No. No, they didn't argue with each other. As I said, they went in one after another, not all of them at once, and we calmed them.[25]

Was the room illuminated?

It was illuminated with arc lamps and electric lights. After all, some transports arrived in the middle of the night.

Was there an odor of any kind in the undressing hall?

No, there was no odor at all. Only on certain days, when there were lots and lots of corpses and another transport arrived, then the stench began.

Didn't the people in the undressing hall notice the smell?

The smell didn't get that far. Before the people came to the undressing hall,

even before they undressed, everything was cleaned with water in case some dirt remained. It was that way in the gas chamber too—the moment everything was over, the whole place was cleaned.

Were Jewish prisoners the only workers in the undressing hall?

Yes. When I was there, apart from us Greek Jews, there were also Jews from Poland. The foreman was a Jew from Czechoslovakia.

Did the people undress willingly or did they try to resist?

Look, they had no choice. Of course they had to agree. A few of them were embarrassed, but they had no choice either. Lots of women were embarrassed. They bent over as they sat so that no one could see them. Don't forget that many of them came from religious homes and had never undressed in front of strangers, even their husbands. That's why many of them felt humiliated. Many of them also knew that they were going to their death. They had an intuition.

How could they know?

They knew. The word had spread. What could they do? We told them, "No, no, you're just going to take a shower, and afterwards you'll go to work."

Who ordered you to say this?

The SS men, the Kapo, and the foreman. The Kapos were veterans; they'd already spent a year to a year and a half working in the Sonderkommando. They told us what to say.

Did you sometimes try to say something else? Did you occasionally try to give a different explanation?

There was nothing to change and no reason to change it. Should we have told them that they would come out of there alive? We didn't want to lie.

Did the people undress sitting down?

Yes, sitting down and also standing up. If there was enough room, they undressed sitting down. If not, they undressed standing up. We told them that they'd get their clothes back after the disinfection.

Did everyone leave his or her clothing there?

Yes, each and every person left their clothing there and walked to the gas chamber as naked as on the day they were born.

You said that it took at least half an hour for everyone to undress.

Half an hour, sometimes an hour.

Did they all have to finish undressing together before they could enter the gas chamber, or did each one go alone into the gas chamber after he or she finished undressing?

Whoever finished undressing went to the gas chamber. They didn't go all together.

Please describe, from your memory, how the people who entered the undressing hall looked.

Most of them had a sad look on their faces when they entered. Those who understood what was happening there were horrified. There were older people, younger people with five-year-old or seven-year-old children, people who carried parents in their arms, ten-year-olds with babies in their arms.

You said that some of them were horrified. But weren't they ignorant about where they were heading?

They didn't know exactly, but basically they didn't feel good about the situation. By they time they reached the gas chamber, they felt trapped.

Did you sense that the people were worried?

Sure. Many of them said that they knew they'd have to die.

How do you know this? Did you hear this?

With my own ears I heard a beautiful teenage girl say this. She told me to my face, "I know I won't be alive half an hour from now." But I wanted to calm her. So to make her feel better, I told her not to worry and said that she would come to no harm.

Do you remember the language in which you spoke to her?

She spoke Yiddish.

Did you understand Yiddish?

Yes. I still do. But when I came to Israel, I didn't want to hear that language anymore.

Where did you pick up Yiddish?

We learned it there. We had no choice. We had to learn a few words in order to understand the Germans. Otherwise, we would have been beaten.

Do you think that the people in the undressing hall knew what was awaiting them?

Some of them definitely knew what was about to happen. After all, even outside Germany it was already common knowledge that the Jews were being murdered.

Nevertheless, they were told that they were going to the "showers."

They told the victims lots of things. They also told them that they'd be rejoining the relatives who they came with. Some of them believed it.

How did the people behave? Were they nervous or calm?

They were afraid, pure and simple. They were terrified. Mothers held their children tight. Afterwards, relatives grabbed each other: brothers, men, women. People embraced and moved ahead together. A few were embarrassed and some hid their eyes. There were girls, eighteen, twenty years old, and lots of old people and children together with young men. They were embarrassed, just

so. But there was nothing they could do. They were all in one place, all together. Some of them cried out of shame and fear. They were very, very afraid.

Do you remember whether they spoke with each other?

They spoke with each other but I didn't understand what they were speaking about.

How did the children behave?

The children behaved like children. They looked for their parents' hands, hugged their parents. What did they know? They didn't know a thing.

Were there religious people among them?

Definitely. Many of the men wore hats. There were also some *haredim* [ultra-Orthodox Jews] among them; they came there in their traditional clothing.

Did some of them pray?

Yes, many of them. Mainly the transports from Hungary. There, all of them prayed. Once Jews came in a transport and brought with them a Torah scroll.

For the most part, were the people quiet?

Yes, they were usually calm.

Did they try to speak with you as soon as you they realized that you were working there, even though you didn't understand their language?

Yes, they tried to speak with me but I was not allowed to speak with them. That was the problem.[26]

How did you respond? What did you do?

They stood in front of me, right in front of me, and spoke, but I couldn't understand what they were saying.

What did you tell them?

I told them to undress. What else could I tell them? That they'd have to go to work. So I told them, "First take a shower, and from there go to work."

In German?

Yes, in German. By then, I knew how to speak German.

Did they ask you what would happen to them there?

No, as a rule they didn't ask me. Really, we couldn't answer questions even if they'd asked us. The foreman circulated all the time and so did the Kapo. So the two men who supervised us were always nearby.

And how did your comrades in the Sonderkommando behave?

Usually no one felt like opening his mouth.

Do you remember any comrades of yours in the Sonderkommando—not necessarily from Greece—who behaved aggressively and cruelly in the undressing hall?

Oh, yes. I'm sorry to say that some were that way, too.

How did they beat the victims, with their hands or with a rod?

With their hands. The Kapo usually also held a rod.

Did they beat people who didn't undress fast enough?

Yes, to speed them up. There were old people who could not undress by themselves.

Did it ever happen that you, too, beat Jews in the gas chamber or in the undressing hall?

No, I never beat anyone.

How did you feel as everyone around you suddenly began to undress?

How did I feel? You can imagine how difficult it was. It wasn't a pleasant feeling to be in the middle with them all. But what could I do?

Did you sometimes feel an inner need to tell people that the worst of all was yet to come?

No, I didn't have the guts to tell them that. Why should I scare and upset them right before their death? Look, they were defenseless. They had nothing. There were babies there, a month old, two months, three months, women, old people. Could they defend themselves?

Did your colleagues always tell the people what the Germans had ordered them to say?

We all said the same things, we were all sad, but what could we do? That's how it looked.

Did you weep sometimes?

Lots of times. Not just once. In the middle of the work, but without tears. Since then, I've had no more tears. We wept without tears.

Many survivors of the Sonderkommando have given me the same responses to the questions that I've been asking. I haven't met anyone who might have had thought differently. How do you explain this?

You couldn't think about things there. It was as it was. We couldn't think at all. We'd become robots, machines. That's what we became.

Did the people who reached the undressing hall come with belongings?

Yes, bundles, food, jewelry, everything.

But when the people got off the trains, hadn't they been ordered to leave everything in the cars?

That's right. Even so, they took things with them, little things, little bundles, purses and rucksacks.

So they brought various objects to the undressing hall?

Yes, bundles, fruit, everything. Usually little things that didn't stand out. They carried these things on their persons even though they'd been ordered to leave everything on the train.

You said that the people brought food to the undressing hall. Why food, of all things?

There were several reasons. Many came with little children and had to feed them. People in trouble brought food for anything that might happen. Also, they didn't know whether and when they'd be given something to eat. So they stocked up for themselves.

What kinds of food did you find?

Various kinds. You could even find eggs, fruit, and meat, and dried fruit, too.

You said that you had once seen a Torah scroll in the undressing hall.

They brought little Torah scrolls to the undressing hall, psalms, too, holy books, and prayer shawls.

Where did the people place the things that they'd brought?

In the undressing hall. Afterwards, a few of us threw everything onto a truck that stood outside. We carried everything upstairs and gathered it together in one truck. From there the things were taken to the "Kanada" Camp,[27] where they were taken apart and sorted.

Did Jews who were on their way to the gas chamber see you while you were arranging the belongings?

No, other members of the Sonderkommando saw us. Apart from us, prisoners from the "Kanada" Camp came and took the clothing with them. We took everything upstairs as soon as the people undressed and left the undressing hall.

What did you do after everyone had left the undressing hall and gone to the gas chamber?

We had to stay in the undressing hall. We gathered up all the clothing and other things and brought them up to the truck, which was standing outside.

Did you bring the objects up the steps that the people had used to go down?

Yes, we took everything up to the trucks that were at the top of the stairs. Exactly the same way.

How long did it take to tidy up the undressing hall and remove the clothing?

An hour to an hour and a half, no more. It took lots of pairs of hands to do the job. Almost all of the twenty Sonderkommando men who worked down below came.

Did the shift end as soon as the undressing hall was tidied up and the clothing removed?

Yes, then the work was over. Slowly we opened the lids in order to release the gas. Afterwards, we also opened the door of the gas chamber. We were far enough away that the gas wouldn't hurt us.

What did people usually bring with them?

Food was the most important, the most precious thing.

Did the Sonderkommando people ultimately benefit from the food that they'd found?

We took the things, yes, we didn't suffer from malnutrition. See, we were in the crematorium building, so it was no problem for us to take whatever we wanted. Those who returned to the camp were body-searched in order to prevent bartering in the camp. We stayed behind at the crematorium and didn't go to the camp. We didn't meet anyone apart from the men we worked with at the crematorium. Because of this, I was able to take food with me.

Where did you hide the food that you took from the undressing hall?

In my pockets. See, the Germans didn't make problems about food. Even when we took clothing. The big problem for the SS men was valuables. Those we weren't allowed to take.

Did you divide up the food among yourselves? Did you share it with your comrades who worked at the ovens?

No, they always had enough food. They also had time to go downstairs and take food for themselves, when the bodies were removed from the gas chamber.

What else was in the bundles and parcels?

Jewelry, diamonds, lots of things were usually concealed in the clothing, things that people had taken with them for the trip, in case of a rainy day.

Did you have to hand all this over to the Germans?

Yes, sure. Before we handed over the bundles, a few of the Sonderkommando men had some time to search for valuables. I never took a thing. Food, yes.

Didn't the Germans interrogate you about whether you'd found gold or diamonds?

What was there to interrogate about? We weren't allowed to take anything. If they caught someone, they beat him or killed him on the spot.

What about your comrades? Did you see them searching through the clothing for diamonds?

They searched quite a bit, yes. A great deal.

What did they do with what they'd found?

They bartered with it. They took cigarettes and bartered them. They could do real business that way. There was money. The big shots always had money and they could engage in trade.

With whom?

With the Polish goyim who worked in the camp. The goyim made the deals. They took the gold and in return provided food and other things that they'd ordered.

What was your daily routine in the Sonderkommando?

We worked in two shifts—day shift and night shift. We changed places every twelve hours.

How many breaks did you have during this twelve-hour shift?

An afternoon break and a morning break, for tea. For the most part, we didn't have time to eat. We ate after work. As I said, we also had food from the victims. They had food, anything you could think of, even oranges and raisins.

Did you receive extra food apart from what you took from the undressing hall?

Yes, we received food like all the prisoners did: soup in the afternoon, a slice of bread and margarine, sometimes a little meat in the evening, when we didn't get margarine.

Did you eat the food that they offered you?

When there was nothing else to eat, we ate it. When we had better food, more filling food, we didn't eat what they provided.

So you did not starve.

The whole time—from April or May, that is, until the liberation, for at least a year—I didn't suffer from malnutrition very badly.

Where did you sleep?

We had rooms over the crematorium.

Did you have real beds there?

Yes, beds with mattresses.

Did you have blankets?

There were blankets and pillows, too. The mattress was made of straw but we were able to cover it with pieces of clothing. We had everything. We never ran short of anything—clothes, food, and sleep, too. We never went hungry, never went without sleep. We had clothing and shoes all that time. Of course, only we Sonderkommando people had all those goodies. The rest of the prisoners could only dream about them. The conditions in our block were exceptional. We had bathtubs at the crematoria and in our blocks at the camp. At the crematorium we had a bathtub on the floor of the living quarters. In the block we also had latrines.

Did you have uniforms? What did you wear?

We wore ordinary clothes, civilian clothes.

Of what kind?

Regular clothes. We also took clothes from "Kanada."

Did the clothes carry a special marking?

Yes, they had a red cross on the back and front and our prisoner number.

Did you have to report for roll call?

Sure. When the shifts changed they held roll call in the yard. The yard was fenced in. The person in charge, the SS man, did the roll call. At roll call we had

to call out our serial numbers in German. They counted us to make sure that no one had escaped.

What happened when one of you became ill?

Even when someone had a high fever, none of us dared to tell the SS man about it. We wanted to help each other so that the Germans wouldn't notice that someone was ill. We'd all report to work in the morning, even people who'd been flogged as a punishment.

What did you do after work?

We went to sleep. When we had to prepare a meal, we did it then. We ate and we slept.

Was there a time for lights-out?

No, in the corridor the light was on almost all night.

What kind of relations did you have with the Germans? Did the Germans speak with you?

There were no relations whatsoever. The Germans spoke only with the Kapo and the foreman. The Kapo and the foreman received the orders and passed them on.

Did you ever speak with the Germans at all?

No, never. I personally never spoke with the Germans.

Didn't they ever address you?

Only when they called out our serial numbers, at the morning roll call. We always answered "Ja."

Did the Germans speak with the Kapo?

Of course they spoke with the Kapo. He was personally responsible for getting the work done.

Did the Germans beat you?

Yes, they beat me.

Severely?

Some were beaten worse. There was one SS officer who hit me on the back of the neck in the crematorium because I wanted to throw some bread to my sisters. Across from us at Crematorium I [II], on the other side of the fence, was the women's camp. My sisters were there. Once I went there to throw them something to eat and the SS caught me from behind. I thought I was going to die. When I returned to the barracks, one of the Polish Jews was there by chance. He laid water-soaked rags on me all night. He was a religious Jew who was usually not taken for work.[28]

Did the Jewish supervisors behave violently during the work?

The Kapo and the foreman were our supervisors. If they didn't like our work, they beat us. The Kapo and the foreman hit people who didn't work the way they liked. Both of them were Jewish. I received beatings from two fore-

men: L. P. and B. M. L. P. hit me with a rod. But he himself was beaten up by his own superiors.[29]

Was this the way your supervisors regularly treated you?

Look, they had to do something to prove themselves to the Germans. It doesn't mean that they always wanted to be that way.

Why did they behave this way?

They thought we wouldn't finish the work unless they pressured us.

How many SS men were there at Crematorium II [III]?

Not many, fewer then ten.

The other Sonderkommando members told me that there was also one SS man from the Netherlands. Is that correct?

A few SS men from Holland worked in all four crematoria. In Crematorium II [III], there was one Dutch SS man. He was very quiet and didn't make trouble. There were Dutch SS men at the other crematoria, too.

Who ordered the people, after they undressed, to walk to the gas chamber?

The Germans gave the order. We told them they were going to the showers to bathe. When they went there, they burst into tears. Women, children, everyone who went there began to weep.

How do you know this?

We saw it. After all, the doors were open until everyone went into the gas chamber. Overhead, on the ceiling, were the "shower heads." The people thought that now that they'd entered the room they could turn on the showers so they could bathe.

Are you sure that the men and women were together all of the time? Weren't they separated?

I'm absolutely sure. I can still see it. They led entire families to the "showers" together.

Did family members go together?

Yes, and sometimes they also embraced in the gas chamber. It was often hard to separate the corpses in order to remove them from the gas chamber. That was a serious problem.

Did the family members wish to stay together under the showers?

Yes, all family members stood together in there. It was a narrow place and people had to push together very closely.

So women, men, and children went to the gas chamber together.

Women, children, men. They clung to each other. Mothers held toddlers to their breasts. They went to their death together.

In certain cases, mothers attempted to save their children by handing them to one of the Sonderkommando people. Did this happen to you?

No, it never happened to me.

How did the people go from the undressing hall to the gas chamber? Can you describe it?

A corridor of sorts ran from the undressing hall to the gas chamber. They went through it into a hall on the side with the "showers"—and that was the gas chamber. There was an elevator in front of the door to the undressing hall, and next to the elevator was the door to the gas chamber. The whole place was underground.

Did the people manage to ask anything as they walked from one room to the other?

No, they asked nothing, I didn't hear a thing. Everything had to be done quickly. There was no time left.

Were the people who were on their way to the gas chamber allowed to hold anything in their hands?

Nothing. They were totally naked.

Weren't they allowed to bring anything with them?

Definitely not. They were not allowed to take a thing. Many of them wanted to take something with them, but they were not allowed to.

One of the survivors of the Sonderkommando told me that some people refused to take off all their clothing. They wanted to remain at least in their undergarments. Were they allowed to do so?

I never saw anyone who was dressed, even partly, on the way to the gas chamber.

Do you remember the expressions on the faces of the people who stepped toward the gas chamber?

I may have looked them in the face. It was a very difficult moment. But I don't remember anything about it. Also, I didn't want to remember the faces. I tried to avoid that.

I asked because I would like to know if you didn't feel inhibited about looking the people in the eye. After all, you'd lied to them . . .

I avoided looking them in the eye. I always tried hard not to look them straight in the eye, so they wouldn't sense anything.

So they wouldn't sense that you had not told them the truth?

Yes. Look, everything they were told there was a pack of lies. Everything we said was a lie. We told them they were going to "take a shower" and that they were going to receive new clothes and food. But it was all a lie.

Did you see the people inside the gas chamber?

Yes. They stood there packed together.

Did they stand that way the whole time?

At first they stood apart. As the room filled up, they had to squeeze closer together.

Didn't the overcrowding upset the people as they were pressed together? Did they complain to you or the Germans?

They were furious, but what choice did they have? They wanted to get it over with as quickly as possible.

And afterwards? What happened after the last of them finished undressing?

They went in, too. Afterwards we gathered them all up and loaded them onto the trucks. German trucks came to collect the booty.

Was the gas chamber illuminated?

Yes, there was lighting, one source of light. Inside the gas chamber there were also four pillars with cages around them, and into them they threw the gas pellets.

Where did these pillars stand?

In the middle of the room, in the middle of the gas chamber. In the middle, between the two parts of the room. In the middle of the room, along it, two in each room.

They threw the gas through these pillars?

Yes. The Germans threw the gas pellets from overhead, as everyone below waited for the "shower."

Describe the pillars. What did they look like?

They were square pillars with mesh around them. Not concrete pillars but mesh ones. They had a lid on the top. The Germans opened the lid and tossed in the gas in the form of pellets, green pellets of gas.

Were the four pillars made of iron?

Of iron, of metal, metal mesh. They weren't concrete pillars. They were angular pillars made of mesh—not of concrete. They had holes in them.

How large was the opening through which they threw the gas into the chamber?

At least thirty-five square centimeters.

Could the people who entered the gas chamber make out the pillars? Did they notice something suspicious?

They didn't know a thing from the very beginning, and they couldn't see a thing because the opening was closed. Everyone was very indifferent. In the little amount of time available to them, the people couldn't see anything around them.

Were there two gas chambers in Crematorium II [III]?

There was one room that could be divided into two. When a small transport came—two hundred, three hundred, or five hundred people—they opened only one room by closing the door in the middle of the room that led to a section that made the room longer.

In other words, could the gas chamber be divided into two parts?

Yes, like a door of a passageway between two rooms in a house.

Was it a sliding door?

No, a door that was closed hermetically.

Were people allowed to bring anything into the gas chamber?

No. Only what could be concealed on their bodies. But what could they conceal? Gold or cash or dollars, for example. But nothing large by any means. There were dollars in the form of gold coins that many people held in their mouths and took into the gas chamber.

Did the Germans find the coins later on?

Yes, most of them were found and taken.

Were you ever in the gas chamber when it was empty?

I went in there later, after the people had died. We went to the gas chamber and removed the bodies. There was an elevator that we used to take the bodies up for cremation.

What was the color of the gas chamber walls?

The color of concrete. After every killing, we washed everything and sprayed it with a substance so that the odor of the gas would not remain.[30] We also washed the floor of the chamber. We were there in the coldest months of winter, so the smell of the gas dissipated quickly.

Who closed the door between the undressing hall and the gas chamber?

Always the SS men.

Always the SS men?

Only SS men. When I was there, I always saw an SS man who closed the door.

Was it always the same SS man?

No, they changed places. The Sonderkommando worked twenty-four hours a day. It depended on when each one's turn came. In any case, those people didn't work in the Sonderkommando.

What did the door look like? Can you describe it?

The door was plated against gas. It was very thick so that the gas couldn't seep through it.

After they closed the door of the gas chamber, did you hear voices from inside? Could you hear anything at all?

A little, not a lot. The voices faded after a few minutes.

What do you recall? Despite what you said, what were you able to hear?

There was the sound of weeping. I couldn't hear anything clearly.

Did you hear screaming?

I remember that I also heard screaming. Yes, if it was possible to hear that from the outside, since the people were screaming loudly. But the door was closed, locked.

What did the people scream there?

God only knows. Anything I'd say would be just a guess. I didn't want to hear.

What did you feel when you heard the screaming?

I always felt something when I saw and knew that the people were very close to the end and to death. It was definitely unpleasant. When you see one-year-old children, six-month-old children, two-year-olds, and even fifteen-year-olds, and you know they're about to die, that soon they'll be cremated and become ashes.

What happened after the gas was thrown in?

About half an hour later they opened the door.

What was the first thing you saw after they opened the door?

On the floor of the chamber we saw something that looked like little bits of gravel, green, like little cubes—the residue of the gas pellets. And lots of bodies, a meter deep, sprawled on top of each other.

Why did the people sprawl on top of each other?

When you're standing up and you suddenly faint, you fall over. The people fell on each other. When they threw in the gas and the people died, they fell. We had to use a lot of force to separate them. You could see on their faces the pain that the asphyxiation caused. After a few hours, blood oozed from the bodies.

In addition to your work in the undressing hall, did you also have to evacuate the corpses from gas chamber?

Yes, we also removed the bodies from the gas chambers and took them to the elevator.

Meaning that you, too, took part in removing the bodies?

Not just me, we were about twenty men there.

Surely the gas was no longer active when you removed the bodies.

No. The gas dissipated and so did the smell.

To the best of my knowledge, each Sonderkommando member had a specific task. Leon Cohen, for example, dealt only with prising teeth . . .

The teeth were ripped out before we threw the bodies into the furnaces. Cohen was upstairs and removed the teeth. Others took the bodies and placed them on stretchers and then to the furnaces. I was always downstairs—in the undressing hall—and I also removed the bodies.

Through what door did you remove the bodies?

Through the same door that the people used to enter the gas chamber. There wasn't another door at the rear wall. Everything was locked.

How were the bodies removed? Can you describe it?

It was terrible! We removed them in various ways. Cohen sometimes grabbed

them by the hands and pulled them out. Sometimes they were so tangled[31] that you had to grab them by the neck and drag them out as you would drag animals. There was no other way.

What did you feel when you began to pull the bodies?

It was easier to separate the bodies at first, when they were still warm, but after ten to twelve hours the bodies were cold as ice, heavy as stone. And sometimes the skin had disintegrated from the heat, from the effect of the gas.

Were the bodies vertical or horizontal?

They were lying on top of each other like a heap of garbage. When they fell, they fell onto each other, like a single bloc.

Did you look at the dead people as you worked?

What else should I have looked at? Yes. Dead people. Young women, twenty or thirty years old, twenty-five, mothers with young children, with babies.

Did you have time to grieve, to experience sorrow, or were you too immersed in your work?

We had no time to think. Thinking was a complicated matter. We blocked everything out.

Did you have time to observe the faces of the people whom you removed from the chamber?

We looked. We saw the people's faces. It was a suffering that lasted three minutes. Terrible suffering.[32] I don't think it took longer. For those three minutes, it was a life-and-death struggle. The people there knew that the end was approaching and tried to climb as high as they could to escape the gas. Sometimes all the skin on the bodies peeled due to the effect of the gas. It looked like burns, burst blisters.

Did that happen often?

Yes, often, sure.

What color were the bodies after the gassings?

After the gassings they had a totally natural color, but after the blisters burst they turned red as fire.

Did the entire body take on that color?

No, only certain places. Not the whole body.

Did you see people holding hands in the chamber?

Yes, there were some who grasped each other by the hands.

How did you separate the bodies?

We pulled them apart. With our hands or with pitchforks. I'd rather you didn't ask me about the details.

But I have to ask. I'd like you to describe this accurately.

Well, I already said that there were pitchforks that were used to drag the bodies, by their hands or their feet.

Couldn't it be done without the pitchforks?

It could hardly be done. They were stuck to each other. One next to the other . . . It took a lot of strength to drag them out.

What did you do to overcome the revulsion?

I did nothing. I couldn't turn anywhere to take my mind off it.

How long did it take to remove all of the corpses?

When the gas chamber was only half full, it took many hours. In the bunkers — where the pits were — it took no time. There they threw them on top of each other, indiscriminately.

Who supervised you?

Our foreman. He didn't help us with the work himself. No, he was answerable only to the Kapo.[33]

Where did you take the bodies that you removed from the gas chamber?

We took the bodies out, to the elevator. There, at the elevator, two men stood. They took the bodies and stuffed them into the elevator that hoisted them up.

In other words, you weren't the one who placed the bodies in the elevator.

Some of the Sonderkommando men worked at the elevator. Some of them removed the bodies from the gas chamber, others shoved them into the elevator, and upstairs were those who took them out of the elevator, and others took them to the furnaces. Everyone did what he had to.

Let's go back to the elevator. How large was it?

It was a freight elevator, an open lift, made of metal.

How large was it?

It was quite large. It was supposed to hold fifteen to twenty bodies at a time, next to each other.

How did it work?

It was electric. There was a supply of electricity. They had everything there . . . Our rooms had electricity, too. The whole camp had electricity.

How did the elevator climb after the bodies were pushed into it?

There was a button downstairs. When they pressed it, the elevator climbed quickly and made all the familiar noises. After it was evacuated, they pushed the button again and the elevator went back down.

Only one floor?

Sure, only one floor.

A very short distance.

Yes, one floor — three or four-and-a-half meters, that's all. Four meters at the most. No more.

Were you ever inside this elevator? Did you ever ride up in it?

No, no. There were Sonderkommando people who were stronger than me. It was their job to load the bodies. They threw them into the elevator like rags. There were also people upstairs, who loaded the bodies onto the stretchers.

Could the men who worked upstairs at the furnaces communicate with you in any way?

No one communicated with us. Maybe the men who worked at the elevator spoke with each other. Look, it was just one floor up and you could hear everything. But I never worked at the elevator.

Did you have to stop working while the elevator was moving?

No, we continued to remove bodies from the gas chamber. The elevator took them up, and we continued to fill it right away.

How long did it take the elevator to travel in each direction?

A few seconds. Three or four meters between floors is not a great distance. If you figure it, how long does it take an elevator to go a few meters?

Where were the furnaces?

They were on the ground floor of the building.

Did the foreman urge you to act quickly to move the bodies upstairs in the elevator?

Sometimes we were told to work faster. Usually they couldn't say a thing because everything depended on what was happening upstairs. If they didn't finish cremating the bodies, there was no point in rushing down below.

Did you smell the odor of the cremated bodies?

A twenty-meter chimney rose over the furnaces. Upstairs I'm sure they could smell something, but not down below.

Were you allowed to approach the furnace area?

We passed the area at the end of the work day. The steps to the living quarters floor led from there. The stairs were inside the building.

Could you see what was happening at the furnaces?

We saw it every day. That's where they took the bodies out of the elevator. My friend, Leon Cohen, examined them and ripped out their gold teeth. He threw them all into a box that was placed there. Two more Sonderkommando men took each body and loaded it onto the stretcher. Two others threw it into the furnace. Some of the stretchers were permanently attached to the furnace; others stood on a mount. They pushed the body into the furnace with a pitchfork. There were five furnaces there, and they removed the bodies one after another from the elevator. The fire in the furnace was so powerful that it incinerated the bodies in a moment and made room for more bodies.

Who started the fire in the furnaces? Was it someone from the Sonderkommando?

Yes. But upstairs the furnaces burned around the clock. From the moment the first transport from Hungary came,[34] they didn't have to restart the fire each time; the fires burned nonstop.

You said that the removal of bodies from the gas chamber did not stop. Was there no break whatsoever? Didn't the work ever end?

What do you mean by "end"? What kind of end could there be? The trains arrived around the clock. There was no end to it. The Birkenau platform was a full-fledged railroad station.

What happened when a new transport arrived before the work at the crematorium ended?

If another transport came during that time, it had to wait. If Crematorium II [III] was still full, they led the victims to Crematorium I [II] or Crematorium III [IV], depending on the situation. There were days when about twenty thousand people were cremated.

What did you do when you just wanted to take a break and rest?

We had time to rest until the work at the elevator ended, because there were five furnaces upstairs and the bodies were loaded into them one after another. You couldn't load them into the furnace on top of each other and all at once. That left a few minutes of respite until we could continue with our work.

You said that when that one crematorium filled up, they went over to another. Who coordinated these actions?

The Germans. We couldn't make the decision ourselves. We were just little cogs in this industrialized death machine.

How was it administered?

The way one would coordinate ordinary actions in different places. When they knew they couldn't send anyone to a particular crematorium for the next five or six hours, they'd use a different one.

How was communication maintained?

Among them, the Germans. None [of us] knew about it. We couldn't have known about it.

Were there groups that were too small to "justify" operating the gas chamber?

Yes. There were groups of five or ten people, mainly prisoners who had gone into hiding and had been discovered by the SS men. They didn't operate the gas chamber for them. They took those people straight to the cremation facilities and as they stood next to each other, they held them firmly by their ears and shot them in the back of the head.

Who did these killings?

The SS men. We had to hold them.

What do you mean by "hold"?

We held them by their ears and the SS men fired a bullet into the back of their heads. They used handguns with silencers.

You must have known that the SS men would eventually liquidate the Sonderkommando people, too. How could you live with this knowledge?

We knew that the Germans had murdered lots of Sonderkommando men during the months before I arrived.

For how long, in all, did you work in the Sonderkommando?

From May 1944 to January 1945, seven months in all.

Do you remember the last transport that reached the crematorium where you worked?

I think it was in late October.[35]

What happened afterwards? Did they stop the transports?

There was no decision as such, but there was no one left to transport! The ghettos had been emptied of Jews.[36] In November, they began to dismantle and demolish the cremation facilities. Almost all of us were assigned to the demolition operation. Everything had to be destroyed. In January, we were still doing it. They also brought in workers from elsewhere to help.

Did you spend a lengthy amount of time at the demolition work?

I was there until the last moment. By then, they had already evacuated Birkenau.

Who gave the order to destroy the gas chambers?

It came from on high. Who knows? How could we have known?[37]

Did you personally take part in the demolition?

Yes, yes. We tore the buildings down and dragged the stones away one by one. As the demolition proceeded, three hundred or maybe four hundred people in the entire camp worked there, including Jewish women prisoners.

Did you destroy only Crematorium II [III] or also other crematoria?

I worked at number II [III] and also at number I [II], but not at numbers III [IV] and IV [V]. I took part in the demolition for at least a month. We did it all by hand. The Germans removed everything and left only a little behind in Auschwitz.

When did the Germans blow up the gas chambers and the crematoria?

I didn't take part in that. It must have been at the very end. We tore down the incineration facilities that were upstairs. The Germans blew up the gas chambers afterwards, before they left the camp for good.

One evening, when work on evacuating the Birkenau camp began, the Germans gathered the prisoners in the yard and wanted to know which of us belonged to the Sonderkommando. They wanted to kill us, but we intermingled with the rest of the camp prisoners. No one wanted to admit that he belonged to the Sonderkommando. From there they took us to Auschwitz I,[38]

where we spent one day. We began to march that night. We came to a place where they put us in a stable to spend the night. We continued to march the next day. We walked without pause, and anyone whose strength ran out was pulled from the ranks and shot alongside the road, wherever we happened to be. I don't remember the names of the places. On the second day we came to another stable. Again we slept. Then they loaded us onto wagons and took us to a place I don't know. If I'm not mistaken, we crossed into Czechoslovakia, where some of the people in the wagons ran away in the middle of the trip. They spoke the language. Maybe they knew the localities and knew where to go.

Afterwards, they took us to a train station and packed us into a train that took us to Mauthausen.[39] In Mauthausen, there was no room left; it was too full. That's where they brought all the prisoners from the camps that they'd taken apart during the retreat. There we slept for two or three nights, almost on top of each other. We spent about four days there. From there they took us by train to the Melk camp in Austria.[40]

There the people were taken to underground factories that made ordnance for the Germans. People did quarrying work and dragged bags of cement. In Melk, I was injured when a stone fell on my leg while I was working. Our shoes weren't in the best condition. I was lucky; a friend helped me stand up. We stayed in Melk until March 10, 1945. When the evacuation of Melk began, they took us to Ebensee.[41]

I couldn't work for fifteen days because of my injury. People who went to work received an extra slice of bread. The work was very hard. It was done on the train and in the caves where they'd built the factories.

Were you taken to all the camps that you mentioned by train?

Yes. We also went from Melk to Ebensee by train.

Was it crowded in Ebensee?

Yes, very, very crowded.

Where did the people live, in barracks?

Yes, in barracks. The SS had huge storerooms there. One day a rumor spread that the Germans were going to gather all the inhabitants of the camp together, bring them to the mountain, and blow the mountain up on top of them. According to the rumor, a highly placed woman kept it from happening. Then, on May 6, the Americans came. We were liberated on May 6.

All the Germans had fled a day or two earlier, at night. When we woke up, we saw no one. Then the inhabitants of the camp began to riot, mainly stealing food and various things. Thousands of people died after the liberation, too. They gorged themselves on the food. That's one of the reasons that many people died after having starved until then.

How did you survive?

I simply ate nothing. I took potatoes, cooked them, and ate them with a little salt. Many of my friends came down with diarrhea and were hospitalized. There were three of us, friends who had worked together in the Sonderkommando and were liberated together. Apart from us, there were many others from Greece whom I'd known and who had come with us to Auschwitz in the same transport. They were liberated with us.

How long did you stay in Ebensee?

Not for long—two or three weeks. By Sukkot, I was already back in Greece. We went via Italy. There, I heard that my two sisters, who had also been in Auschwitz, had survived. The lists of survivors were passed on from one locality to another. Of course, we looked for relatives who had survived.

In Brussels, we boarded American ships and reached Piraeus via Italy. Shortly before the holiday we reached Greece. There, relatives told me that my older sister, Miriam (Marie), was alive in Greece. As soon as I heard that, I went to look for her. I had only an approximate idea of where she was living. I had no exact address with me.

How did your sister survive?

Like 90 percent of the people in Volos, she fled to the mountains. When the Germans demanded a list of the townspeople, the rabbi of the congregation informed the members that he was leaving town and urged everyone to join him and flee to the mountains. That's how she survived.

After I found my sister, I stayed with her for at least a month. Afterwards, I went back to my hometown, Arta. Since I found nothing there, I returned to Athens. There I found my two younger sisters, Ziona and Simcha (Asimo), who had returned from refugee camps in Germany.[42] Together we returned to Volos and spent at least the next year there. I began to do some business—sales work in the villages—and earned a little money to keep me alive. My sister married a survivor of Birkenau in Greece, and my unmarried sister and I decided to immigrate to Palestine.

Did you tell anyone what had happened to you in Birkenau?

No, at first I didn't speak with anyone. It wasn't so pleasant.

Were you also afraid that people would not believe you?

I didn't expect people to believe me. Even today, they don't believe it when you say you worked in the Sonderkommando and came out of it alive.

When did you first describe your experiences to someone?

Back in Greece, I told my sisters.

Did they believe everything you told them?

Yes. After all, they'd been prisoners in Birkenau.

When did you reach Palestine?

In the autumn of 1946, at Sukkot, after some training in Athens the British arrested us in the Land of Israel [then Palestine] and took us to Atlit.[43] Back then, Jews were allowed to immigrate to Palestine only on the basis of a fixed monthly quota. People who had relatives in Palestine or who had pull were released during the first month. We were released only after a full month. From Atlit, they sent us to Kefar Sava—no house, no food, no nothing. For several nights, I slept in the street, under a tree. One day, a Friday, I went to Tel Aviv. I found work and earned two Palestine pounds but couldn't get back to Kefar Sava. Again I had to sleep under the stars. This went on until we could afford to rent a room in Tel Aviv.

In the Land of Israel, did you tell anyone exactly what you had done during the war?

There was no one I could tell it to. Our adjustment was slow and we didn't have spare time to think about it. We'd come to Palestine with nothing but the clothes on our backs. We didn't have relatives or acquaintances. We hardly spoke Hebrew.

Did you establish a family?

I got married in 1951, after the War of Independence. I had two children. Our son, Yehoshua, is married and has two children. Our daughter, Penina, teaches special education.

Can you remember the names of some of the people who worked with you at Crematorium II [III]?

First I'll give the names of those who are still alive: Shaul Chazan, the Gabai brothers, the Venezia brothers; and those who have died: Pepo Kolias, who returned to Greece and died there; Moshe Levi, with whom I returned to Greece; and Leon Cohen. Both of them died a few years ago.

Did any of your friends from Greece work at Crematorium III [IV]?

Yes, and at Crematoria IV [V] and I [II]. But all of them were killed during the uprising.

Do you remain in touch with former members of the Sonderkommando?

I met Ya'akov Gabai forty years later, here in Israel. And when I heard that Leon Cohen was sick, I took it very badly.

Did you make a deliberate effort to forget your term of labor in the Sonderkommando?

You can't forget something like that. At certain moments you ask yourself, "How could I live day after day with thousands of bodies in one room? How did I come out of it alive?" Sometimes I don't believe that I endured it. But I'd always told myself, "You've got to get out of here alive."

Do you often have recollections of that period?

Always, not just sometimes. Sometimes, I think, "What? Where were we? What did we do? Where did we get the strength to do it?"

When do you have memories of Auschwitz in particular—during the day or at night?

I don't sleep at night. I sleep two or three hours, that's all. I've been that way for years. Because of the memories.

Would you agree with me that you've become somewhat inured to atrocities? After all, you saw the most terrible thing imaginable. After what you experienced, could anything worse happen . . . ?

Yes. People sometimes tell me, "We've just gone through the worst experience of all. . . . Oh, how we suffered . . ." Yes, and all I can say is, "I witnessed everything that you suffered on one day. If only you'd been there! One day would have been like everything you've suffered in your whole life."

Why do you think you were able to endure it all? What helped you survive?

The will to live, so that I could tell it to future generations, so that the truth would come out. On the one hand, I run away from the need to tell it, but on the other hand, the whole world has to hear this story. Otherwise, they'll think the Holocaust never happened. Look, there are people who deny the Holocaust.

You survived. How do you view the world today, after Auschwitz?

How do I view the world? The world has gone downhill badly since World War II. It's not the same world as it used to be. Not only the world has changed but everything has changed.

It's hard to believe that two sisters and a brother were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau and that all three survived. Only the older members of my family were murdered. Only my parents. If prisoners who worked on the train hadn't grabbed me then, on the first day before the Selektion, when I wanted to help my elderly father, I would have been exterminated, too!

3

Abraham and Shlomo Dragon: "Together—in Despair and in Hope"

In the summer of 1993, as the documentary films on the Sonderkommando were being made, I stood with several survivors of the Sonderkommando next to the "White House" in Auschwitz-Birkenau. Marcello Pezzetti, my colleague at the Center for Jewish Documentation in Milan, approached us and showed me a photocopied page from a book that quoted a 1945 testimony about the "Red House" and the "White House." The witness in that account was Shlomo Dragon. His testimony was recorded by a Soviet investigative commission that spent several weeks in Auschwitz immediately after the extermination camp was liberated. Shlomo Dragon was one of the most important witnesses who appeared before the committee.

On the basis of this testimony, given more than forty years earlier, my Italian colleague identified the place where we were standing as the very spot where the pits had been excavated, the pits where so many bodies had been incinerated back then. I asked him why he should base himself on written testimony when Shlomo Dragon himself was there and could speak with him personally! Shlomo, a tall, spry, rather young-looking man, stood a few meters from us. My colleague was stunned. He was sure that none of the Sonderkommando prisoners was still alive. For him, Shlomo Dragon was a testimony, not a living being.

Indeed, Shlomo Dragon and his brother, Abraham, were living testimonies.

They had never been totally liberated from Auschwitz; they still dreamed about the camp at night and saw visions and scenes from it.

The two brothers have totally different temperaments. Abraham, the older brother (on the left in the photo) is restrained, moderate, a little bashful, reticent, introverted, and withdrawn. He leaves most of the talking to his brother. Shlomo, "the tall man," is energetic and overtly self-confident. His impressive perseverance and courage are authentic, as evidenced when he relates how he bared his chest to an SS man and invited him to draw his handgun and shoot him.

Shlomo is the same intrepid prisoner who smuggled hand grenades into the Birkenau camp and concealed them under his mattress for use in the Sonderkommando uprising. Thus, for several weeks the two brothers slept on a mattress of hand grenades. To maintain security and to keep his brother from worrying, Shlomo did not disclose the existence of his cache to Abraham. The brothers complemented each other and worked together as a team. They were inseparable throughout the war, remaining so during their service in the Sonderkommando.

It may have been their strong bond and their easygoing approach to life that helped them to survive three years on the planet of death—an uncommon occurrence in the history of the Sonderkommando. Most of their comrades were murdered to keep them from testifying about the crimes that had been committed in the camp.

When I visited Abraham's home to conduct the interviews, his wife, Simha, gave me a gracious welcome. Simha was originally from Salonika; her husband is a native of Poland. In Israel, that is an uncommon combination. Simha is a delightful woman, bursting with optimism and empathy. The cake she served was baked from a familiar recipe of the Jews of Salonika. Despite her Greek origin, she speaks fluent Yiddish. Her knowledge of Auschwitz gives one the impression that she was there herself and might even have worked in the Sonderkommando.

Abraham and Shlomo's main job in the Sonderkommando was "barrack room duty." Barrack room duty workers were responsible for cleanliness in the Sonderkommando's residential barracks (block), distributing food, and providing for all their co-workers' needs. Those assigned to this labor were not allowed to leave the block. In the evening, after the other Sonderkommando men returned to the block, they told the brothers about the day's horrors. Thus, they knew exactly what their comrades were doing. When large transports reached the camp, the Dragon brothers had to join the working groups at the furnaces. They were mobilized for specific labors: gathering up the murdered people's belongings, dragging bodies out of the gas chamber, and cremating bodies in the furnaces.

Both brothers have amazing powers of recall. They furnished me with many details that others had long since managed to forget. Each of my many conversations with them ended with a toast. I told Shlomo, the "drinking man," that I did not care for liquor, but it was no use. Shlomo likes to have his guests drink *le'chaim*—to his life and to theirs.

Shlomo and Abraham Dragon, I would like to talk with you about the time you spent as prisoners in Auschwitz-Birkenau. First, however, please tell me briefly about your background.

SHLOMO: Both of us were born in Zuromin, Poland.[1] Our parents were Daniel and Malka (*née* Beckerman).

Before the war, we lived at 1 Bizon Street, Zuromin. There were very few Jews there—something like twenty-five hundred in all. For a living, we did what almost half the local population did—tailoring and shoemaking. When I turned thirteen, I had to help support my family. We worked that way until 1939, that is, until the war broke out. Then the troubles began.

ABRAHAM: The war began on September 1. The Polish authorities advised all the young men to flee town. I was twenty then. We took their advice and left quickly. We went into hiding out of town for at least a week. Then the Germans came in and I went back to Zuromin.

Why did the Poles advise you to leave town?

ABRAHAM: They did it because they were afraid of the Germans. They were afraid that they'd take the young men away. We lived uneventfully until the Jewish holiday season. The day before Yom Kippur,[2] the Germans came and demanded a list of all the Jews in town. In November 1939, they ordered all men aged eighteen to forty, Jews and non-Jews, to assemble at the town hall square. Everyone came. What happened then? They made the goyim line up on one side of the square and the Jews on the other side. They sent the goyim home and took us off to labor. We had to harvest potatoes from all the fields in the area. We did this for a few weeks, and after we finished the work we were sent home. We found no one at home. The Germans had sent all the Jews in Zuromin to Warsaw.[3]

SHLOMO: That's how things were in Zuromin in November 1939. The farm where we worked was close to the German border. After the work had been completed, they sent us home for a short time. One night, we woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of an orchestra. They rounded us up and sent us off in horse-drawn carts—the train did not go through our town—for about thirty kilometers to the neighboring city. There they put us in railroad cars.

There were several stops along the way. The first was in Neuwiedhof, where

they searched us from head to toe. Anyone who had gold had to turn it over. We handed over everything, everything we had. From there we walked to Warsaw. This was before the ghetto was established.

ABRAHAM: I remained alone and that's how I reached Warsaw, where I looked for my parents. I found them at the synagogue at 8 Franciskanska Street. My brother Shlomo was there by then, too.

Did you live there?

ABRAHAM: Yes, we lived there with other families from Zuromin. There were many families at the shul—ours, relatives, and lots of acquaintances.

SHLOMO: When people came to pray during the day, we squeezed into a corner. At night, after the services were over, we got ready for bed. In the morning, we had to get up early because people came for services. That's how it was all that time.

How long were you in the Warsaw ghetto?

ABRAHAM: For more than a year. When we reached Warsaw, there was no ghetto.[4] The ghetto was established later on. We worked there like the rest of the Jews.

SHLOMO: In the early days of the ghetto, I was on the "Aryan" side. I had an ID card that proved I held Polish citizenship. There was no need for a photograph, just a fingerprint. I smuggled food on the streetcar that took me to the ghetto.[5] The streetcar ran through the ghetto and I was able to throw the food from the moving streetcar into the street. My brother was in the ghetto and he knew when I'd throw the food. He waited for me in the street and, according to a signal that we'd worked out, he gathered up the stuff and I stayed on the streetcar until it reached the "Aryan" side.

At the railroad station, I waited for trains from the countryside with food for sale. I bought the stuff there. One day, Gestapo men appeared at the railroad station and arrested me. "Hands up" they ordered, "because you're a Jew." I denied it. They drove me to the Gestapo headquarters, threw me in jail, interrogated me, beat me, tortured me, and used dogs, until I lost consciousness. They let me go two days later. When I reached the ghetto, I jumped out of the streetcar.[6] My parents didn't know where I'd been all that time. In the ghetto, I changed clothes and went back two days later.

My father, my brother Abraham, and I worked in the ghetto until the beginning of 1941.

What kind of work did you do?

SHLOMO: Dirty work. In the ghetto, we did hard physical work.

ABRAHAM: And when Shlomo and I got the notice to move to the "Jewish community," we knew it wasn't a good omen. From there they sent the people to the camp. Then we escaped from the ghetto to Plonsk.[7]

Did the two of you escape together?

ABRAHAM: Yes, just the two of us. In Plonsk, they hadn't set up a ghetto yet and we began to look for work.

When was this?

ABRAHAM: Early 1941. The Germans built an airfield near Plonsk. We worked there until they opened a front in the war against Russia. At that stage, they didn't want us anymore and they sent us back. We had no choice but to look for work in the countryside. I was a tailor and so I did a little tailoring and some farm work. My brother was with me. Both of us made money.

When we saw no possibility of returning to the Warsaw ghetto, we looked for ways to have our parents join us. We sent a courier to Warsaw and instructed him to get our parents out of the ghetto and bring them to Plonsk. We managed to reunite in Plonsk with our mother, our young sister, Chaytscha, and our brother, Itzick. Our father was ill and couldn't leave the Warsaw ghetto. Our oldest sister stayed with him and took care of him. Later on, I was told that our father starved to death in the ghetto. Our oldest sister also fell ill in the ghetto and died there.

How did you receive word about the death of your father and sister?

ABRAHAM: Acquaintances came from Warsaw every now and then and told us about the deaths.

SHLOMO: Now we were all together in the Plonsk ghetto, but we were totally broke, we had nothing to live on. My brother Abraham and I went to work in one village. We didn't work together. In the meantime, they took Mother, Chaytscha, and Itzick from the ghetto to the Nowy Dwor camp for labor.

ABRAHAM: By then they were already sending people from Plonsk, Mlawa,[8] and the vicinity to the camps.

SHLOMO: That's how we lost all contact with them.

ABRAHAM: Evidently they stayed there for only a short time. Afterwards, they were rounded up and sent to Auschwitz.

SHLOMO: Some time later, while we were still in the village, we got a report that our younger brother had escaped from Nowy Dwor and returned to the Plonsk ghetto. We managed to get in touch with him. He was eleven or twelve years old then. In the ghetto, they put him in the orphanage, but if he wanted to stay in the orphanage he'd have to tell no one that he had brothers in the village. We stayed in touch with him for quite a while and even made him a bar mitzva party. Abraham and I stayed in the village until 1942.

ABRAHAM: From time to time we walked from the village to the Plonsk ghetto, but since we no longer had ID papers we couldn't live there and stayed in the village most of the time. Maybe I should have stayed there and removed my brother from the ghetto, but he refused to leave. He didn't want to be

parted from the children in the orphanage. "Wherever the children go, that's where I'll go," he said.

SHLOMO: Then we heard that four hundred children from the orphanage, including our brother, had been sent directly from the ghetto to Auschwitz. Once we received this information, we had no further reason to remain in the village. There were no Jews left in the vicinity. So we decided to escape secretly in the dead of night and leave behind the families that employed us.

Just the same, how did you find yourselves in a transport to Auschwitz?

ABRAHAM: In 1942 we heard that they were rounding up all the Jews to send them to a labor camp. We decided to join them.

Am I right in assuming that you did not know what "being sent to a camp" meant?

SHLOMO: That's right. We didn't know what a camp was. It seems that that's how we got to Auschwitz.

So had you decided to remain in the underground, you would not have been placed aboard the transport to Auschwitz. In other words, you went of your own free will, didn't you?

ABRAHAM: Yes, we really did. But you have to understand that it was no simple matter to hide in the villages around Plonsk. The Poles knew us and denounced us all the time. We had to flee from village to village. I was a tailor; I did some sewing here and there, so somehow we stayed alive. We fled from village to village, and eventually we had no way out.

Did you go together in the same railroad car?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Abraham, do you remember the exact date?

ABRAHAM: It was in late 1942.

What month?

ABRAHAM: In December, right at Hanukka time. At first, they sent us to the Mlawa ghetto, where we spent eight days until the transport set out for Auschwitz.

Do you remember what time it was when the train departed?

SHLOMO: The train started out at midday.

Do you remember the car that you rode in?

ABRAHAM: It was a sealed cattle car. There were also a few passenger cars.

How many people did they place in each car?

ABRAHAM: It's hard to estimate—the car was full. We were tightly packed. There was no room to sit or lie down. We could hardly move. It was terrible. We wanted to get somewhere quickly. The conditions were inhuman.

Abraham, apart from your brother Shlomo, were any other members of your family with you?

ABRAHAM: It was just me and Shlomo. We had already lost our parents. Mother had been sent from Nowy Dwor to Auschwitz-Birkenau. Mother, our sister, and our brother reached Auschwitz-Birkenau a month before we did.

Do you remember how long the trip to Auschwitz took?

ABRAHAM: I think it was two days.

SHLOMO: Yes, we traveled for at least two days.

Did you know that you were heading for Auschwitz?

SHLOMO: No, by the time they'd put us on the train, we'd already heard the rumor that we were going to a labor camp. That's what they said. In fact, until we got to Auschwitz we didn't know which way we were heading.

Had you heard anything about Auschwitz to that time?

SHLOMO: No, we didn't know a thing. During the trip, we peeked out through the holes in the car walls, and we could read signs with the names of the places that we passed. But we didn't know that we were going to Auschwitz.

Do you remember the date on which you reached Auschwitz?

SHLOMO: We reached Auschwitz at the end of a two-day train ride, in a transport of twenty-five hundred Jews from the Mlawa ghetto. It was the day before Hanukkah, December 7, 1942.

Can you remember what time it was when the train pulled up to the unloading platform at Auschwitz? Did people die on the way in your car, too?

SHLOMO: I'm absolutely sure that we arrived at night! We reached Birkenau at midnight. The only people there were SS men with dogs and searchlights. They opened the doors and greeted us straight away with beatings. At first they beat us to make us get out of the cars faster. Left behind in the cars were old people and children who had been crushed or had died for some reason. During the trip, which took two days, we had had nothing to drink. There was no water. I really don't know how we made it.

SHLOMO: Yes, people died in our car, too. They were left in the cars. Afterwards they gathered them up.[9]

Where did the train stop?

ABRAHAM: The train stopped at a particular point at the Auschwitz station: the Auschwitz camp was on one side, the Birkenau camp on the other.

Was that the platform where all the Jewish transports arrived?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Are you referring to the platform near the entrance to the main camp?

ABRAHAM: Just so, some distance away from the main gate of the Auschwitz camp. There was an empty field there. That's where the trains with the Jews stopped.

Can the two of you describe how the selection proceeded?

ABRAHAM: We got there at night and saw a field full of searchlights[10] that lit us up. There they divided us. That's where they did the selection.

SHLOMO: At the platform we were greeted by the camp commander, the registrar,[11] and the camp physician. They took everyone out of the cars, separated the women and children from the men, and told us to line up in ranks of five. Each of us had to file past the camp doctor, who did the selection. The doctor and other Germans selected us. Everyone had to walk past him. He stood there with a stick in his hand and pointed: left, right. He didn't say anything; he just pointed with the stick, this way or that. We didn't know which way was better. Abraham and I went to one side and the doctor continued to point with his stick, right or left, until he got tired. Then everyone went to the left. Some time later, the doctor started to point again, but when he got tired everyone again went to the left.

ABRAHAM: When we got there, the commander of the *Selektion* hardly said a word He may have just said, "Over here" and pointed with his finger to the right or to the left: young people to one side, the elderly to the other. They didn't remove the women in this selection. There were transports where they removed women and girls, but not in ours.

SHLOMO: In the group of men, two hundred were selected. Abraham and I were among them.

Did the two hundred men who were chosen for labor have something in common?

ABRAHAM: They were all young; they didn't take any of the older ones.

Were they all sturdy young men?

SHLOMO: The SS doctor looked only at their appearance. He chose the men he wanted. Obviously, those were only the able-bodied. He inspected the men and wrote down which of them looked the most suitable. Those chosen were asked about their occupations. We told them that we were tailors and that's how we were selected.

A little while later we were led on foot to the Birkenau camp. The rest of the men were sent to join the women and children. They shoved them into trucks and drove them to some place in the camp. Eventually, I found out that they'd been gassed to death.

ABRAHAM: From a distance, we saw flames coming from that direction.

SHLOMO: But we didn't know what it meant.

Where did they take the two hundred men who passed the selection?

SHLOMO: We were not taken into Auschwitz at all. They brought us to Camp A in Birkenau. When we got to Birkenau, the sky was red because they didn't have furnaces with chimneys yet, just the pits. The smell of charred flesh hovered in the air. The day we got there, we didn't know yet why the fire was

burning. Only a few days later did we realize what was happening there. They took us to Block 25. The *Blockälteste* [block elder][12] was named Pinchas.

Where was Pinchas from?

ABRAHAM: Lodz, I think.

SHLOMO: When we reached the Birkenau camp, we asked the people around us when the rest of them would get there. They told us, "You'll see in a little while." Then they pointed to the smoke billowing in the distance and said, "Look, look, that's where they are." We didn't understand what was going on there. But never again did we see any of the people who'd come with us in the transport.

ABRAHAM: They trucked them to the pits and murdered them there.

What happened on your first day in Block 25?

ABRAHAM: Block 25 was where they put everyone who reached the camp before they divided them up. One of them was Grünbaum's son,[13] who had fought with the Spanish resistance.

SHLOMO: We reached Block 25 on December 9, 1942, and stayed there until the late afternoon, until four or five o'clock. Then they took us out again and gave us a little soup to eat. That's when *Oberscharführer* Moll[14] appeared before us for the first time. Only later did we find out whom this terrible Moll was.

In the meantime, it was night and Moll stood in front of us with a lantern. Each of us had to walk past him. Moll stared at each man, asked questions, and carefully examined his strength and health. He explained that he was choosing people for work in the rubber factory. He said that to confuse us. We didn't have to undress[15] at this roll call. He asked me what my occupation was. I told him I was a tailor, and he made a comment in German: "Yes, we need tailors." He told Abraham the same thing. Moll saw that we were healthy. To those who were feeble, he said, "No, no, we don't need any more tailors." If a young man who looked healthy came past, he said, "Yes, we need more shoemakers." And so on. This was the ruse that he adopted. He spoke with each man separately and in the end only a hundred men remained. They took them all to Block 2 in Birkenau. This block had belonged to a group that had worked there before us; its members had been murdered a day or two earlier. Their clothes were still lying there, as if they'd just taken them off.

ABRAHAM: We could tell that there'd been people there just a short time earlier. There was leftover food and other stuff all over the place. We didn't know at that time that the people there had been the previous members of the Sonderkommando. Only later we were told that they'd been brought there and murdered. We took their places.

In other words, were you the new Sonderkommando from that moment on?

ABRAHAM: Yes, it was a totally new group; no one in the previous group remained. Later on, at the "Sauna,"[16] they tattooed our numbers onto us.[17]

What is your number?

SHLOMO: Eighty-three thousand fifty-nine.

And yours, Abraham? What is your number?

ABRAHAM: Eighty-three thousand sixty.

SHLOMO: He was standing behind me.

Where did they tattoo the number?

ABRAHAM: When we reached Block 25 that night, we stayed there. The next morning they took us to the Sauna, where we showered. They shaved our hair and gave us different clothing. When we came out barefoot, Shlomo and I could hardly recognize each other. We were standing next to each other but continued to look for each other even so. Suddenly it was as though we'd become strangers to each other. Afterwards, after the shower, they tattooed the numbers.

Was this inside the building or outside?

ABRAHAM: We stood there in a long line, and they tattooed the numbers.

Do you remember how they did it?

SHLOMO: With a needle. The tattooer held the prisoner by the forearm, rolled up his sleeve, pulled the forearm toward him, and burned in the number with the needle. When he finished tattooing my number, it was my brother's turn. He got the next number because he was standing behind me.

Where did they take you afterwards?

ABRAHAM: During the day they took us to the "women's camp" in order to pick up and haul away stones. It was terribly muddy there. Even our shoes got stuck. I didn't have extra shoes. There they did something horrible. Our truck with the stones pulled up suddenly. The driver raised the back end, where the stones were, and deliberately dumped them on us. It was terrible. Block 25 was just a transit block, as my brother already told you. Afterwards, they selected us for the Sonderkommando. That's how we got to Block 2.

Were all the men in Block 25 chosen?

ABRAHAM: No. After work, we were ordered to go to the *Umschlagplatz* [parade ground], and, like I said, Moll appeared and selected about a hundred men for the Sonderkommando.

During the roll call, did Moll explain the purpose for which these men were needed? Did he state explicitly that they were being detailed to the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: No, we didn't know why we'd been selected.

How long did it take from the time you reached Auschwitz to the beginning of work in the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: A day or two. During that time, they made us work outdoors.

At what stage did the Germans use the word "Sonderkommando" in regard to this labor?

ABRAHAM: The group was called the Sonderkommando from the very beginning. In the women's camp, there were two special blocks, Block 1 and Block 2. Block 1 was called the *Strafkommando,* the penal detail,[18] and we, in Block 2, were called the Sonderkommando. Block 2 was closed in on both sides. The people in Block 1 couldn't leave and neither could we. We spent the whole time in the block.

SHLOMO: We soon realized that we'd have to be isolated and quarantined from the rest of the people in the camp.[19] We weren't allowed to go out in any way or form.

Where was Block 2?

ABRAHAM: Next to the camp gate, where the women's camp was set up later on.

Was the building made of stone or wood?

SHLOMO: The building was made of stone. A hundred men were taken there. We were five to a bunk, and there was only one blanket for all of us.

Who was your block elder?

SHLOMO: It was Georges, a young Jew from France. He didn't have a deputy, but there were a foreman and a Kapo.

When were you first put to work in the Sonderkommando?

SHLOMO: We were quarantined in Block 2 until the next morning. It was December 10, 1942. After all the groups had gone out to work, Moll came to the block and gave an order: "Sonderkommando men—out!" That's how we knew we'd been chosen for special duty and that we wouldn't be working at the rubber factory. We didn't know what kind of work they wanted to give us or what the group was all about, since no one had explained anything to us. At Moll's command, we lined up in front of the block in ranks of five.[20] SS men with dogs surrounded us and led the two groups, about a hundred men in each group, out of the Birkenau camp, toward the village of Brzezinka. From a distance we already noticed smoke and the stench of burnt metal. But we didn't imagine the spectacle that we'd see there. We still didn't know a thing.

How long did it take to walk from Block 2 to this place in the forest?

ABRAHAM: Fifteen minutes, maybe.

SHLOMO: It was snowing as we marched toward the forest. Then we came to an open field. On one side of the field stood a hut that looked like a stable with thick doors, and some distance away there was a white cottage with a thatched roof.

In what locality were those buildings that you've described?

ABRAHAM: A place called Brzezinka. It's a Polish name and it means "birch forest." It was about one kilometer from our block in Birkenau.

SHLOMO: We stopped at the hut. Moll divided us into groups of ten and twenty men and began to explain. Then he opened the door of the hut and there we saw something weird: the floor of the hut was made of sand and on it were traces of people who had apparently undressed there: shoes, men's clothes, children's clothes, women's clothes. They were lying there as if the people who'd worn them had just undressed. Totally new clothes. Everything was strewn on the sand but there was no sign of the people. We couldn't imagine what it meant. I told myself that the clothes ought to be hung up so they wouldn't get dirty.

One group stayed in the hut and bundled the clothing. They led the second group to the cottage. From afar we still couldn't see any sign of what was happening there. We also couldn't tell whether there were people in the cottage. Moll began to explain what we were supposed to do: "You have to remove the dead people from the house. There are corpses there, and you have to take them out in carts, throw them into these big pits, and incinerate them." He promised us that we'd receive food and get to sleep in the camp but that we'd have to work hard; otherwise, they'd punish us. Those who didn't want to work would be beaten and dogs would be set on them, he said. There were SS men with dogs there; they were our constant escorts.

As Moll opened the door of the house, bodies fell out. We smelled gas. We saw corpses of both sexes. The whole place was full of naked people on top of each other, falling out.

From what place did the corpses fall out?

SHLOMO: From the cottage. The dead bodies were lying there, closely packed together, on top of each other, so that when the door opened they all fell and piled up next to the door. I saw how the bodies were falling—bodies of adults and children.

Bodies of men and women?

SHLOMO: Yes, they were all together.

What happened next?

SHLOMO: Almost all of us went into shock. We stared at each other without uttering a sound and fell silent. We were too terrified to make a sound. We were like that for a couple of days and then we pulled ourselves together again. We'd never seen anything like it before.

Did you know that these were the bodies of Jews?

SHLOMO: Yes, because we'd been told in the very first days that they were

burning Jews in the camp. I was beside myself. I was in absolute shock. I didn't know whether to scream or not. It was the first time in my life that I'd seen a dead body. I didn't know what I was doing there. I looked at the others. They'd all gone out of their minds. My first thought was that there was no way I could continue working there.

You wanted to escape . . .

SHLOMO: Or to die. One thing was clear—we didn't want to be there anymore. I don't know how I made it through the first day.

Did your companions around you react similarly?

SHLOMO: Yes, they all reacted the same way. They all asked, "What's going on here? Are we in hell? Is this a bad dream?"

How old were you then?

SHLOMO: I was seventeen.

And you, Abraham?

ABRAHAM: I was twenty by then.

How did you react when you saw so many dead people for the first time in your lives?

ABRAHAM: I was sorting the clothes so I didn't see what Shlomo has described. Only one group went into the cottage; the other group stayed with the clothes. I was in the second group, so I didn't see it.

SHLOMO: We didn't know a thing. We couldn't speak with anyone. We couldn't ask questions. We only knew that they were apparently the people who'd been forced to undress in the hut and that the clothes that were left behind there were theirs. We figured that the clothes in the hut had belonged to the people whose bodies were lying in the cottage. We were told, "This is where you have to take them out with these carts!"

Who gave these orders? Who explained the essence of the job?

SHLOMO: One of the Germans. It might have been Moll.

Exactly what was the cottage used for?

ABRAHAM: The gas chamber was there.

What did the gas chamber look like?

SHLOMO: It was a little house with a thatched roof. Its windows were blocked with stones. On the main door was a sign that said, "Caution, High Voltage, Danger of Death." The house was divided into four small rooms. There were two windows in the wall of the largest room. Each of the other three rooms had only one window. The windows had wooden shutters. Each room had a separate entrance. You could see the sign "Caution, High Voltage, Danger of Death" only when the door was closed. When the door was open, you saw the sign, "To Bath and Disinfection Room." The people who were

sent there to die, the ones who were in the room, saw the second sign that was hanging on the door, the one that said, "To Bath and Disinfection Room."[21]

According to what you've explained, this means that the people had first undressed in the hut . . .[22]

SHLOMO: Yes, and afterwards they went out barefoot and walked in the snow to the second house. Then they threw the gas into the house.

So the cottage served as a gas chamber.

SHLOMO: Yes. That's how it was.

How far was the cottage from the hut?

SHLOMO: Maybe thirty to fifty meters, but there was no paved path between the two buildings.

How did they throw the gas into the cottage?

SHLOMO: There was a little window in the side wall. At first we didn't see it at all. The Sonderkommando people didn't have to be around while the people were poisoned. They usually did the killing at night. First they selected twenty members of our group to help with the work.

The killing itself was always done, without exception, by SS men. The people were trucked to the huts. We helped the sick climb down from the trucks and get undressed in the hut. Everyone had to undress there. The huts and the area between them were surrounded by SS men and dogs. The naked people had to run from the hut to the gas chamber. The SS men who stood next to the door prodded them along with rods. As soon as the gas chamber was full, the SS man closed the door and then he ordered his assistant to begin the killing. He said, "Get it over with!" and then he took out a canister from a Red Cross car[23] that drove behind the transport designated for gassing. The canister contained the gas. He also took out a hammer and a special knife. The SS man put on a gas mask, used the hammer and the knife to open the canister, and poured the contents through the window into the gas chamber. Then he closed the window. It was a metal canister and it had yellow labels like the ones they used later on at the crematoria. He returned the box, the hammer, the knife, and the gas mask to the car. The car was known by the Germans as the "Sanka." I personally often heard them ask, "Is the Sanka here?"

After the SS men finished their work, they drove away in the sanitation truck and we were taken back to the block. I don't know how it was done before, but after the gassings that were done at night, an SS guard stayed at the bunker room.[24] Sometimes the bunker remained unguarded and then crates with gold teeth and other things that were kept in the huts were stolen.

And then you took the bodies to the pits?

SHLOMO: Yes. We were given gas masks and then we went through the door

with the sign that said "To the Disinfection Room." No disinfection was done behind the door, of course. We dragged the bodies into the yard. We took the bodies from the hut to the pits in carts and threw them in. . . .

Were those who removed the bodies from the huts the same people who took the carts to the pits?

SHLOMO: Yes, we took the carts right up to the edge of the pits.

You, yourself?

SHLOMO: Yes.

What did the bodies look like after they were gassed?

SHLOMO: When they opened the door, the bodies were lying on top of each other, jammed together, in layers. Others were standing up. I often saw something white on the dead people's lips. It was terribly hot in the gas chamber and you could sense the sweetish taste of the gas. When we went into the chamber, we could still hear groaning, especially when we began to drag the bodies by their arms to take them out.

Once we found a baby who'd been stuffed into a pillow and was still alive. The baby's head was also buried in the pillow. After we removed the pillow, the baby opened his eyes. Meaning that he was still alive. We took the bundle to *Oberscharführer* Moll and told him that he was alive. Moll took the kid to the edge of the pit, put him on the ground, stepped on his neck, and threw him into the fire. With my own eyes I saw him trample on that kid. The baby moved his little arms. He didn't cry out, so I can't say for sure that he was still breathing. In any case, he looked totally different from the other bodies.[25]

How long did it take to remove the bodies from the cottage?

SHLOMO: We worked almost all day long.

How did you drag the bodies out of the chamber?

SHLOMO: By the hands. At first four people dragged one body. That got Moll angry. He rolled up his sleeves and threw the bodies through the doorway and into the yard, real fast. Even though Moll showed us how it should be done, we told him that we couldn't work like him, and eventually he allowed us to work in pairs.

So you dragged the bodies out of the house in pairs?

SHLOMO: Yes, two or four men pulled the bodies out. We threw them into the carts, lugged them to the pits, and threw them into the pits.

Where were the pits?

SHLOMO: Not far from the house.

Can you describe the pits?

SHLOMO: On the other side of the house were four huge pits, twenty meters long, three meters deep, and seven to eight meters wide. At the bottom trees

were laid in a crisscross pattern so that air could get in from below. That's where we threw the bodies.

How did you throw the bodies into the pits? In any particular order?

SHLOMO: No. At first there was no order. The corpses were thrown in as they had come.

Didn't the Germans give instructions about this?

SHLOMO: No, they just explained what we had to do in order to divide up the bodies evenly so that the pile wouldn't be bigger on one side than on the other.

After the bodies were thrown into the pits, what came next?

SHLOMO: After we took all the bodies out, we had to clean the house, wash the floor with water, spread sawdust, and whitewash the walls.[26] After we finished and we gathered up all the things, we watched the Germans pour gasoline on the bodies. Then they assembled us, and as we waited for them to take us back to Birkenau we saw how they started the fire. The fire began to burn from the top down and then we returned to our block.

Was it the Germans who started the fire?

ABRAHAM: The Germans started the fire and threw in the gas. All this was done by the Germans.[27]

SHLOMO: We removed the ashes from the pits but only forty-eight hours after the bodies were burned. There were still bits of bone in the ashes. We found skulls, kneecaps, and long bones there. We shoveled the ashes to the edge of the pit. Then trucks came, and ashes were loaded onto them and then thrown into the Sola River, which was nearby. We also had to take care of scattering the ashes. We did it under SS guard. The path between the road used by the trucks and the river was covered with sheets of cloth so that not even a grain of ash would fall on the ground. To keep the ashes from sinking into the ground, the SS men wanted to throw them into the river and let the current carry them away, far away. We shook the sheets of cloth over the water and swept the place thoroughly.

How many people participated in this labor detail?

ABRAHAM: About two hundred. One SS man divided us into separate groups.

How was the work divided up among the two hundred men?

SHLOMO: Some of us gathered up the clothes. A different group sorted the things that the victims left behind in the huts and took them to the "property warehouse."[28]

Another group removed the bodies with carts and others threw them into the pits. Another group ripped out gold teeth from the mouths and collected the hair or the glasses.

Another group gathered up bodies and put them in trolleys that ran on a

track. Others wheeled the trolleys to the edge of the pits. The tracks ran between the pits.

There was a group that got the pits ready for cremating the bodies. They had to cover the bottom of the pit with thick logs. On top of the logs, in a criss-cross pattern, thin branches were laid and dry branches were laid on top of them.

An additional group took the bodies from the trolleys and threw them into the pits.

After they finished making all the preparations, Moll or some other SS man poured gasoline into the four corners of the pit, lit a stick, and threw it into one of the corners. The fire caught and cremated the bodies. As long as Moll was busy there, we stood in front of the house and watched what was happening in the pit.

Shlomo and Abraham, did both of you work together for all of that time?

SHLOMO: No, we were given different jobs. I was with another eleven men in the group that dragged the bodies out of the hut and put them in the trolley.

ABRAHAM: I was in the group that went to the hut where the victims' clothes were, and I had to work there. They explained to us that everything had to be sorted in bundles and that a truck would come and gather up all the clothes. We had to check the pockets, remove their contents, and tie the shoes together.

Abraham, as you sorted the clothes, did you know what was going on in the cottage across from the hut?

ABRAHAM: When we reached the camp, I asked where the rest of the people who'd been with us on the platform during the *Selektion* had been taken. They told us, "You see the fire? They're going to heaven." When they chose us for labor, they didn't tell us where we were heading. We didn't know that we'd be working at the place where they cremated the bodies. But having seen the whole thing with our own eyes, we could already imagine the worst of all. Then I also realized that the people who'd undressed in the huts just threw their clothes onto the floor before they were taken to the cottage, to the gas chamber.

Did you yourself ever enter that cottage, the gas chamber?

ABRAHAM: No, never. Only the others—the ones who had to drag the bodies out, they went into the cottage.

Where did you bring the clothing after you gathered it?

ABRAHAM: We bundled the clothing and took it to the trucks. The Germans took it to the "property warehouse."

Were large quantities of clothing collected there?

ABRAHAM: Yes, the clothes of all the murdered people were there—the clothing of all the people who had been murdered in the cottage.

When did Shlomo tell you about the bodies? Did you know what he'd been doing for all those hours?

ABRAHAM: We told each other everything right away. We weren't very far from each other. We stood outside and each of us described what he'd been doing.

Did you believe him when he said that the house was full of bodies?

ABRAHAM: I certainly believed him. After all, I had seen the clothing.

Apart from the cottage, were there other crematoria in Auschwitz-Birkenau at the time?

ABRAHAM: No. The new crematoria were still under construction.

Were all Jews who were brought to Auschwitz at that period of time taken to this cottage?

SHLOMO: Yes.

It wasn't efficient there . . .

SHLOMO: What do you mean? We worked in two shifts; that was the problem! Apart from Bunker 2, there was Bunker 1, half a kilometer away. It was also a brick house with two gas chambers. These chambers had only two doors, and each door had one opening through which enough gas was thrown for one chamber. Next to Bunker 1 was a granary and two huts that were used as undressing halls. The pits were a long way away, so they had to use trolleys.

From which countries had the Jews who were murdered at that time come?

SHLOMO: If I'm not mistaken, they came from the area where we grew up. These were transports of Jews from Poland—from Mlawa, Plonsk, and Grodno. Transports from Holland and France also came later on, but most of them came from Poland, from our vicinity. The first Jews to be killed in the two bunkers were from Poland; they were followed by Jews from Lithuania, France, and Germany.

The two cottages, the "bunkers," were far from the camp. How did the people in the transport get there, on foot or by train?

ABRAHAM: By truck. When we arrived and were waiting on the platform, two trucks were standing there. The people who were designated for killing were put on the trucks. We, who passed the selection, went to the camp on foot.

So those who had been doomed to death were placed on trucks?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

And those who were selected for labor, to live, went on foot?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Could you see the trucks carrying the people as they approached the bunkers?

SHLOMO: We saw them often.

What kind of trucks were they?

SHLOMO: I think they were Wehrmacht trucks.

Were they marked with an emblem of some kind?

SHLOMO: I think so. The trucks were covered with tarpaulins. Everything was tightly sealed. The people couldn't see where they were being taken. Until they arrived, they didn't know where they'd been brought and where they were.

Did you remember the color of the trucks?

SHLOMO: Olive green.

How many trucks did it take to bring one transport to the cottage?

SHLOMO: They didn't do it in one go. Each of them went back and forth.

Back and forth?

SHLOMO: Yes. The trucks delivered the people, returned empty, and came back again and again until all the Jews who'd come in the transport were taken to the huts.

Did you hear voices or shouting from the trucks?

SHLOMO: People called each other by name. Parents called their children, children called their mothers or fathers. Sometimes we could also hear them reciting the Shema. Those are the voices that we heard. . . .

When were you able to hear the voices?

SHLOMO: When the trucks passed us. On my first day there, when I saw the people together—men, women, children—I had a bad anxiety attack. I'd never seen such a thing. I was so shocked that I decided that I couldn't go on working there. I told my brother, "I can't keep doing this work." After the whole place was cleaned up, I took bits of glass from a broken bottle that was lying there, slashed my arm, and said that I couldn't continue to work.

Had you finished the work by that time?

SHLOMO: No, not the whole thing. I slashed myself, the blood spurted, and I said, "I can't work anymore."

Where did you do that?

SHLOMO: There, at the pit.

Did anyone witness what you had done?

SHLOMO: Yes, but I had to continue working.

Did you really want to die when you slashed your arm with those shards of glass?

SHLOMO: Yes, yes, I wanted to die. I didn't know what I was doing there. It was a tragedy. So many people had died there all at once. They were all my age. When had I seen so many bodies before? Yes, I was in total shock.

And then you made up your mind?

SHLOMO: I just didn't care what would happen. I was ready to take the risk. In any case, I told myself, I won't go back to this work.

Did you lose lots of blood?

SHLOMO: Yes, lots and lots. My arm also swelled up and I really couldn't continue working. But what else could I do? I told myself that I wouldn't continue to work, come what may. Nothing mattered to me.

Did all of this happen on the first day?

ABRAHAM: Yes, the first day that we worked there.

SHLOMO: That evening we were taken back to the camp—not to Block 1, where we'd gone to work from, but to Block 2.

Did you know by the end of the first day that you belonged to a labor company that was called the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: Yes, they told us that this was the block of the Sonderkommando men.

Was only one block detailed to the Sonderkommando at that time?

ABRAHAM: Only one.

This block—did the prisoners know that it was the Sonderkommando block?

ABRAHAM: The previous Sonderkommando had also lived in that block, so the people in the camp knew that it was the Sonderkommando block.

SHLOMO: We found things under the beds and mattresses in the block that obviously came from outside the camp: fresh food, soap, new shirts. We felt that there was something different, unusual, about the place, but we still didn't know that the Sonderkommando men had lived there. After a day or two, we found out from people in the camp that the members of the previous Sonderkommando, those who had worked before us, had lived here.

ABRAHAM: The block was topsy-turvy. We found leftovers from the previous Sonderkommando there. Some time later, when we were screened for the barrack room duty detail,[29] we went out to bring food from the camp mess hall, which was outside the perimeter of the Sonderkommando living quarters. Some of the prisoners, seeing new people there, asked me where I was from. I said that I'd been assigned to the Sonderkommando. They replied by telling me that all the previous Sonderkommando members had been murdered.

In other words, they told you that the Sonderkommando had been liquidated.

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Did you believe it?

ABRAHAM: You could see that the people who lived in the block before us had disappeared. But we didn't know that they'd murdered them all. We knew that the group that had lived in our block had been taken away. We didn't know exactly what had been done with the Sonderkommando people. We thought they'd taken the people who were in the block before us to some other place for housing. Only later on did we realize that they'd really been murdered.

Your barracks, Block 2, was isolated, wasn't it?

SHLOMO: Block 2 was across from the mess hall, and the second group, the one that worked in Bunker 1, also went back there. The block was closed in by a wall and was separated from the rest of the camp. We were not allowed to come into contact with prisoners in other blocks.

ABRAHAM: None of the blocks was fenced in. Only Blocks 1 and 2 were separated by a wall. German guards were posted at the door to those blocks. Shlomo and I did barrack room duty; we were not allowed outside the blocks.

Please explain how they kept you apart from the other prisoners.

SHLOMO: Each morning we got up for work like the other groups. The other prisoners went from the block to the gate without close guard. The guard detail joined them only as they passed through the gates of the camp. We were treated differently: we were escorted by the guard detail, which was made up of about fifteen SS men with dogs, from the entrance to the block, so there'd be no contact between us and anyone else in the camp. They took us back to the block the same way.

Were they always the same guards?

ABRAHAM: Yes. There was also hardly any turnover among our supervisors. When we worked at the pits, one of the guards beat up one of our members. We stopped working and said that we wouldn't continue. It was like a mini-uprising. What happened then? They summoned high-ranking officers right away. A man named Hössler[30] came over and asked us what it was all about. We said that if it weren't enough that we were doing bone-breaking labor, we were also suffering from beatings by the SS men. They could kill us for all we cared, but we wouldn't go on working that way. Hössler calmed us down, said that we wouldn't be flogged anymore, and immediately ordered them to give us extra food. From then on, we weren't beaten during work.

What clothes did you wear at work?

ABRAHAM: We were ordinary civilian clothes, not striped prisoners' clothes. The pants had a red stripe and there was a red cross on the back. We wore blue caps. Everyone who worked in the Sonderkommando wore the same clothes. Those who worked outside the camp wore the striped clothes.

Was it possible to keep the religious commandments?

ABRAHAM: There were some religious Jews who wanted matzo for Passover.[31] What did we do? When transports that had a little more flour came in, we took the flour to the block. In the middle of the block was a long heater. I'd known how to bake matzo since I was a kid, because I'd always worked at a bakery before Passover to make some money. So I baked a few matzos on the heater in the block. We could do that only because we were isolated and no one saw or knew what we were doing.

Did the people who asked for the matzo belong to the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: Yes, those men belonged to the Sonderkommando.

How did your first night in the Sonderkommando pass?

ABRAHAM: It was a terrible, dreadful night. I thought, "How am I going to endure this? How will I come through this?" We began to talk about it and explain what was happening around us. We simply couldn't believe that something like this could exist. It must be an isolated case, we thought. We didn't know that transports came in one after another and that the Germans were bringing Jews from all over Europe to Auschwitz this way.

Did the two of you discuss the situation that night?

SHLOMO: No, we didn't discuss what we'd seen the first day. We were so shocked that we couldn't figure out where we were at all. Look, it really was just our first day of work in Auschwitz. We didn't know what the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps were and what the crematoria meant. The whole thing took us so much by surprise; it was like getting hit. Our eyes saw it but it didn't sink in. There were doctors and intellectuals among us; we were a mixed bunch of people and we didn't understand. We asked each other, "Where are we? What is happening here?"

Shortly after we reached the block, the block elder was ordered to assign several people to barrack room duty.

ABRAHAM: The block was divided into four wings, and two men in each wing were assigned to barrack room duty.

SHLOMO: The ill and the weak were chosen for this work. Luckily for me, I belonged to the group of injured and weak people, so I was chosen. I asked them to assign my brother to barrack room duty, too.

Under those circumstances, it must have been important for you to place your brother in the barrack room detail, too.

SHLOMO: Yes, I was willing to sacrifice everything for that goal. In all, eight men were chosen for this work, so we stayed behind in Block 2 and didn't go out for work.

On the second day, if I understand correctly, you stayed in the block while the other two hundred men went out to work?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

If so, you spent only one day cremating bodies, and from the second day on you did barrack room duty in the Sonderkommando block.

SHLOMO: That's actually right, but when the mass transports came, we also had to take part in the work outside the residential block.

Shlomo, exactly what did your barrack room duty consist of?

SHLOMO: We had to clean the rooms of the people who went out to work, make the beds, straighten up the floor, deliver and dole out the food, bring the

utensils back to the central mess hall, and wash the dishes. Everything had to be clean and tidy.

Abraham, what more can you tell us about how the work day proceeded?

ABRAHAM: After they woke us up, they took roll call in the block. We didn't go out with the others. Their roll call was done outside and ours was done indoors. Apart from that, there was a bathroom where we could shower and there was a latrine block.[32]

What time did you have to wake up?

ABRAHAM: Around 5:00 A.M. We people on barrack room duty got up at the crack of dawn but we stayed indoors, in the block. After roll call, the others went out to the places where the killing and cremation were done. We stayed behind and began to clean up and make the beds. We cleaned everything, and afterwards we brought bread and food.

When did the rest of the workers return?

SHLOMO: In the afternoon. After they finished the work, they returned to the block where the food was waiting for them. By then, we'd managed to arrange everything, the soup, a quarter of a loaf of bread.

Was the food that you brought meant only for the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: Yes, just for the Sonderkommando. We brought it in barrels. Two hundred liters of soup for one hundred people.

What kind of soup was it?

SHLOMO: Soup made of rotten potatoes and murky water, that's all.

Was that all they gave you to eat?

SHLOMO: Yes. That's what the people were served when they returned from work. The next morning they got a ration of water in a bowl and a fluid that the Germans called "tea." That was the food we had to get by on.

Where was the central mess hall?

SHLOMO: The mess hall was next to Block 1 and Block 2. Every section of Birkenau had its own mess.

Did you also bring food to the Germans who were guarding you?

ABRAHAM: No, we brought food to the Sonderkommando men only. The mess hall was large. We went there and brought the rations back. They gave us big pots and bread, and we divided them into four portions, one for each wing of the block.

Food wasn't a special problem for us Sonderkommando people because we had an additional source. When transports came, the Sonderkommando members took the food that the people had brought. Some of it reached us. Every transport brought food, things that were typical of the country from which it had come. Jews brought the typical foods of their country: those in transports from Greece brought figs, olives, and dried fruit. The first trans-

ports came shortly before Passover, so a few of them brought matzo. We also found cigarettes in the people's belongings. People in transports from Poland sometimes brought liquor. Transports from Holland always had sardines and cheese. Jews from Hungary brought sausage and smoked beef. But most of the food was taken by the "Kanada" Kommando people near the train. Only a little food got as far as us, whatever we could find in side pockets. We divided the cigarettes among the prisoners in the camp because we didn't smoke.

Were you ever hungry?

ABRAHAM: It's hard to say that we were ever hungry because the Jews in the transports always brought something with them. The Germans didn't need these things, so they didn't object when we took the food. What is more, sometimes we got extra food from the Germans, a little more soup. That's because the Germans were afraid of the Sonderkommando; we were under no one's control. We knew we might be murdered any day, so we had nothing to lose and were ready to risk our lives at any moment.

Did the Germans let you take the food that you found in the undressing hall?

ABRAHAM: Yes, the Germans turned a blind eye. But that also depended on where the transport came from. The people in some transports reached Auschwitz straight from their homes and apartments, not from the ghettos. These transports brought more food then the others did, of course. The ones from the ghettos hardly brought a thing because there wasn't any food there.

So you didn't suffer from a shortage of food?

SHLOMO: Not necessarily. There were times when we also had problems with food.

Let's continue speaking about your daily routine. What else went on while you did your barrack room duty?

SHLOMO: We cleaned the block; we brought the bread and then the soup. The Sonderkommando men returned to the block at a regular time. When they finished the work, they were sent back to the block. But sometimes there were large transports and there were times when it was necessary to work twenty-four hours a day. When there wasn't any work, the Germans let us rest.

Did you live with the rest of the Sonderkommando prisoners?

ABRAHAM: Yes, sure, we lived with them.

If so, let's talk about relations between you and your comrades. Did you know what they were doing?

SHLOMO: Yes, sure.

What did they tell you when they returned to the block in the evening?

SHLOMO: Every day had its own story. They told us where the transports came from, the screaming they'd heard, the sights they'd seen. We heard every-

thing: children came today, people from this or that place came today, a transport from Holland with such and such people came today. They didn't know what awaited them. At first they shouted and defended themselves but nothing helped. Those stories were repeated every day.

Did you have any free time left after you finished cleaning and tidying up the block?

ABRAHAM: Yes, but we really had nothing to do.

So how did you pass your free time?

ABRAHAM: We did nothing. We sat in the block. What else could we do, after all? We didn't have books. We sat in the block and gabbed.

Did you sleep next to each other?

SHLOMO: Yes, five men to a bunk. Two slept on the upper part. The upper bunks were considered better. Since we were in charge of barrack room duty, we had clout.

ABRAHAM: Shlomo and I stayed in the block almost every morning. The people on barrack room duty went out to work only when a large transport came.

SHLOMO: The Germans made everyone except for the people on barrack room duty go to work. Abraham, I, and six other people stayed behind in the block. Yes, when there was pressure at the gas chambers, the people on barrack room duty also had to join in with the work.

Does "pressure" mean that many transports were arriving?

SHLOMO: Yes. When large transports came and they needed help, they took us out to sort clothing or do other jobs.

ABRAHAM: Sometimes in the course of our work we were able to bring people to the block and afterwards get them out. All of this was done secretly, of course.

SHLOMO: For example, it sometimes happened that a father and son came to the camp, the son was assigned to the Sonderkommando, and the father worked in a different part of the camp. When the father came to see his son, we let him in, or vice versa. We always let them in. We did it against the Germans' orders and without their knowledge.

Didn't you take the danger into account?

SHLOMO: If we'd been caught, we would have been severely punished. There was a lockup at the entrance of the block, a prison cell of sorts. A prisoner who was being punished was put in the lockup as soon as he got back from work. They packed four people in there, in an area hardly larger than one square meter. It was entered from below. You couldn't sit or lie down. They stood all night long and the next morning they had to go to work. It was a really atrocious thing.

Abraham, the two of you were in Block 2 at first, weren't you?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

How long did you live there?

ABRAHAM: About a year. During that time, expansion work was done at the Birkenau camp and we were transferred from Block 2 to Block 13, which became the Sonderkommando block.[33] Block 11 belonged to the penal detail, the *Strafkommando*. The blocks were totally sealed and were meant exclusively for the Sonderkommando and the *Strafkommando*. The block had a yard that was closed in to keep the Sonderkommando totally separate. The block where the *Strafkommando* men lived was quarantined the same way.

About how many people lived in Block 13?

ABRAHAM: Five hundred at a certain stage—and then their numbers fell to four hundred. When the large transports came, six hundred men may have lived there. When the workload decreased, they took two hundred Sonderkommando men away and murdered them.[34]

Did the two of you witness the removal of your fellow workers, who were murdered later on?

ABRAHAM: Yes. The first time, they took out two hundred men and told them that they were being moved to another workplace. The one who said that was the *Lagerälteste* [camp elder], Franz Danisch.[35] Shlomo and I were on that list. Since we knew that they wanted to wipe us out, we planned to escape on the way. We took some knives and saws from the belongings of the transport people and brought them to the block. Everyone had a few knives and by using them they planned to escape during the train ride. Then I got sick. The SS men wanted to cover up the fact that not a single member of this group would be coming back, so they told me, "Sick people don't join. You have to stay here. There we need men who can work." I said I'd stay only if my brother could stay, too. So Shlomo stayed in the block, too, and that's how we survived.

At first we didn't know whether that was a good decision or a bad one. In fact, we wanted very badly to get out of there and escape. A little later we heard that the people who'd been sent away were murdered in the crematorium in Lublin.[36] They took them to Lublin in a sealed railroad car, and gassed them to death somehow—I don't know exactly how.[37] All two hundred men who'd been sent away were murdered there. We continued to live in the block.

So the fact that you'd fallen ill might be seen as a miracle. Am I right?

ABRAHAM: Yes. Just so.

Isn't that how you and your brother survived?

ABRAHAM: Yes, that's how we stayed alive.

Did this happen before the four new crematoria were built?

ABRAHAM: Yes. The crematoria were still under construction.[38]

On roughly what date did the incident that you just described happen?

ABRAHAM: Late 1942, December 1942.

Were the bunkers still being used in December 1942?

ABRAHAM: Yes. The new buildings were completed in the spring of 1943. We couldn't have moved there until then.

SHLOMO: Bunker I was razed to the ground before the end of 1943. After Crematorium II [III] was built, the huts next to Bunker II were demolished and the pits were covered up. Bunker II itself operated on and off until the end. After a long break, it was reactivated when the transports of Hungarian Jews arrived. At that time, new huts were built[39] and the pits were dug out again. At that time we worked around the clock at Bunker II, I worked there two days straight. During that time, we removed the bodies from the gas chambers, after the killing, in a process that was much shorter than the previous one.

Thus far you've described how things were before the new crematoria were built, during the time when there were only bunkers. What happened after the new crematoria were built? Did your work change in any way?

SHLOMO: In 1943 we went from Camp BIb to Camp BIId, Block 13, and afterwards to Block 11.

What was the difference between working at the bunkers and working at the crematoria?

ABRAHAM: For us there was no difference at all. We did the same work, with the same group, we lived in the same block, did the same barrack room duty.

Did you notice that they were building new crematoria?

SHLOMO: Only from far away. The Germans built the new facilities with the help of prisoners from the camp. At the trial in Vienna, I testified for the prosecution against the engineers of the buildings.[40] The defense argued that it wasn't the engineers who'd designed the crematoria. They didn't know that there were still Sonderkommando survivors who could testify against them.

Later on, you moved to Crematorium III [IV].

SHLOMO: That's right.

Did you live there, too?

SHLOMO: Yes.

When was this?

SHLOMO: Towards the middle of 1944.[41]

Who divided up your duties when you began to work at the new crematoria?

SHLOMO: There was an SS officer who explained exactly what we had to do. A few of us were ordered to remove corpses from the gas chambers and cut off the hair, others were told to pull out the gold teeth; and others worked at the furnaces. Others gathered up the ashes and sorted the clothing.[42]

ABRAHAM: I sorted the clothing. It was the same work as I'd done at the

bunker. Shlomo's job and mine added up to collecting the clothing, arranging it in bundles, and taking the bundles to the truck.

SHLOMO: Yes, I also worked at sorting the clothing. They already had a regular team there; we were just auxiliaries. Kaminski was the Kapo.[43] There was another Kapo. Both of them were Jews, so I could ask them not to assign me to work at the furnaces.

How many times did you have to work at the crematorium?

ABRAHAM: I don't remember exactly. They called us whenever large transports arrived, like the Jews who came from Lodz, Greece, and Hungary. At those times, the gas chambers worked nonstop. Moll ordered us all to go out to work, so we understood that large transports had come.

SHLOMO: Crematoria I, II, III, and IV [II-V] were already working by then. Sometimes we were called out for work at Crematorium III [IV], but not for long periods of time.

What did you have to do at Crematorium III?

SHLOMO: We had to remove the bodies of people who'd been gassed to death.

Can you describe the compound where the crematoria were?

SHLOMO: There were four crematorium buildings. Each building had a closed-in yard that the victims crossed on their way to the crematorium.

Can you describe the yard?

SHLOMO: The yard was surrounded by an electric barbed wire fence, very neat and clean. So was the building. The exterior of the crematorium didn't give a clue about what was happening inside. The yard was rather wide, so that the people who were taken off the trucks could cross it on their way to the building, to the undressing hall.

Were there any plants or flowers in the yard?

SHLOMO: Trees grew there but there were no flowers. The trees lined the perimeter of the yard. The whole place was full of trees.

Who escorted the people in the yard?

SHLOMO: Always the Germans.

Can you describe the outer appearance of the building?

SHLOMO: It was made of red bricks. Very clean construction.

Were all four crematorium buildings the same color?

SHLOMO: Yes, they were made of red bricks and had red shingle roofs.

Was there a sign of any kind there? Can you recall some inscription?

ABRAHAM: No, I don't remember an inscription or a sign.

How did Crematorium III [IV] look from the outside?

ABRAHAM: Like a large factory building. It had no windows, just little shuttered windows, to throw the gas in.

Had there been an attempt to make the buildings look pretty?

ABRAHAM: Sure. You'd never imagine that the place was a crematorium. Because of the chimney you could think it was a factory building. Until the end, no one could suspect anything of what went on inside the building.

Were the chimneys of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] tall?

ABRAHAM: Yes, but not as tall as those of Crematoria I [II] and II [III]. You could see the chimneys of Crematoria I [II] and II [III] from far away.

Were the buildings of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] shorter than those of Crematoria I [II] and II [III]?

ABRAHAM: Crematoria I [II] and II [III] were one-and-a-half stories, meaning two levels, but Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] were on one level only.

SHLOMO: There were two entrances—one for the victims who'd just come and one along the side for the Germans. At the top, under the roof, there were windows, not very high up. Crematoria I [II] and II [III] had two stories and a basement downstairs. At Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V], everything was on one level. At Crematoria I [II] and II [III], the victims went down to the basement hall to undress.

What were the victims allowed to take with them when they left the train?

SHLOMO: Almost nothing. They weren't allowed to take the things they'd brought. They could take some food only in pockets or in little bundles and packages. They were told to leave everything in the train or on the platform.

Just the same, they took things with them . . .

SHLOMO: Anyone who could remove little things did so even if it was prohibited. Everyone took a little food. But they were not allowed to take the suitcases. Whenever a group of people began to walk from the train to the crematorium, the Germans searched them very carefully, and if someone brought a package, he had to leave it on the platform.

Just the same, even so, people brought various things to the crematorium building . . .

SHLOMO: That's right; the searches couldn't have been that strict. Little rucksacks and purses, people could sneak those things in once in a while.

How did the people behave when they reached the yard?

SHLOMO: They still hadn't noticed that they were approaching death and behaved normally. The Germans told them that they were about to be disinfected.

ABRAHAM: As soon as they reached the crematorium yard, an SS man climbed up on a chair, gave a short speech, and told the people that they were going to the showers and then they would be sent to work. So they had to remember the number of the hook where they'd hang their clothing. The people believed him.

Did he give the same speech every time?

SHLOMO: No, not every transport got a speech by an SS man, only from time to time. Some transports weren't told a thing. When the explanations were given, they were always given in German.

ABRAHAM: No, it wasn't always that way. When a transport came, say, from France, and there was someone who could translate into the language that the people spoke, the translator gave the orders in French. But it was always one of the SS men who gave the speech.

Did you sometimes listen to the speech?

SHLOMO: Yes, but usually I didn't work there, just sometimes. The speech took a few minutes. Afterwards the people walked to the undressing hall and they were often prodded by the SS man Burger, who'd say, "Hurry up, the food and coffee are getting cold." When people asked him for water, he told them that the water was cold and wasn't fit to drink, so they had to move quickly. After the shower, they'd give them tea that they'd prepared for them.

ABRAHAM: They walked through a wide doorway that led from the yard into the building. There was a large hall on the right-hand side. The people were told to undress there.

Did men and women undress in the same hall?

ABRAHAM: The entire transport went into the hall and was ordered to undress there.[44]

Did you, Abraham, do the same work as you did in the bunker?

ABRAHAM: Yes, I did the same work there, sorting and arranging the victims' clothes and things. But mostly Shlomo and I did barrack room duty. When large transports came, we were called down to help at the crematoria.

And then, when large transports came, what were you ordered to do?

ABRAHAM: We had to work in the undressing hall only and not at the furnaces themselves.

Exactly what did you do in the undressing hall?

ABRAHAM: We gathered up the clothes and took them away. They didn't let us go up to the gas chambers.

When you finished gathering the clothing, what did you do with it?

ABRAHAM: We put it into bundles and folded it up. We tied the jackets by the sleeves.

Did you separate the jackets from the shirts?

ABRAHAM: No, we gathered everything together but first we looked through the pockets, hoping to find something useful.[45]

Did you find anything?

ABRAHAM: Sometimes.

What, for example?

ABRAHAM: Gold—coins, rings, and pins. Food. All kinds of things. In the transports from Holland, we found sardines and canned milk. The first transports from Greece brought figs and dried fruit.

SHLOMO: The undressing hall was between the gas chambers and the furnaces. The people undressed there, and after they were gassed to death we removed their bodies from the gas chamber. There weren't enough furnaces to burn all of the bodies at once. So after we had straightened up the undressing hall, we first had to take out the bodies and put them back in the hall. We removed the clothing from the hall quickly so they could empty out the gas chamber fast.

So the undressing hall also served as . . .

SHLOMO: Yes, as a room where the corpses that had been taken from the gas chambers were put, a "storeroom" for bodies, you might say. They were taken to the furnaces from there.

Did you also help to tidy up the undressing hall?

SHLOMO: Yes, that had to be done quickly. It was part of our work.

How long did they give you?

SHLOMO: They gave us two or three hours.

Where did you take the clothes?

SHLOMO: We piled them onto a truck. The truck took all the bundles to the storage barracks at the "Kanada" division. That's where the things were sorted.

Can you describe the undressing hall where you worked?

ABRAHAM: The hall was very big, sealed up to the top, and lit. A corridor, not particularly long, led from there to the gas chamber. The walls of the room were lined with benches.[46] I remember it well; they were made of white boards. Over the benches were hooks to hang up clothes. Each hook had a number.

SHLOMO: The benches lined the walls of the entire room. Lots of metal hooks were fastened to the boards. On top of each hook was a number.

How large was the room?

ABRAHAM: Very large; they could cram at least a thousand people into it. When a large transport came, some people had to wait outside until there was room.

Are you speaking about the buildings of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Were you present in the undressing hall as the people undressed there?

ABRAHAM: By the time I went to the undressing hall, the people were already in the gas chamber. We weren't allowed to contact or talk with the people who went into the hall.

Can you describe your work in the undressing hall?

ABRAHAM: I took the clothes off the hooks and gathered clothing that was strewn all over the floor. The clothes corresponded to the places where the people came from. People from Poland usually wore soiled ghetto clothing; those from Holland or Germany wore better clothes. We also found fancy and very expensive clothes. The yellow patch was sewn on the clothing. I was ordered to take off the patches, stuff everything into the jacket, and tie up the jacket sleeves. I had to make all these items into a bundle.

Shlomo, what do you remember about the undressing hall?

SHLOMO: The people walked into the room and once they were all inside they began to undress. In the middle of the room there were these columns and the benches were arrayed around them. The floor was made of concrete. There were windows under the roof and the room was lit by several lamps. The walls were white, but outside there were red bricks.

How did people reach the gas chamber?

ABRAHAM: From the undressing room the people went down a narrow corridor to the gas chamber. At the entrance, there was a sign: "To the Disinfection Room."

Did men and women go to the gas chamber together?

SHLOMO: No, the women went in first and afterwards the men.

ABRAHAM: The men waited naked until the women were in the gas chamber, and then they went in. They put the women in first because they were usually very upset and confused. The men followed them into the gas chamber and at the end they put in more women, the ones who were still outside. However, they didn't adhere strictly to this particular order. The women were told that they were going in first because the elderly and weak people weren't fast enough and they'd go in after the men.

SHLOMO: When a large transport with lots of people came, the people were beaten to force them to enter the room. The Germans attacked people with dogs. They wanted to escape, of course, so the crowd was packed into the gas chamber. That way, they could fill the gas chamber to the last centimeter.

When did people first begin to get suspicious?

SHLOMO: Only when they were already in the gas chamber did they sense that something was out of whack. When the gas chamber filled up, the Germans stood at the door with dogs and continued to pack the people in so that more than were already inside could be gassed. Those who hadn't gone in yet began to shout. The Germans responded with murderous beatings. The people were already naked and defenseless, so they were pushed in by force.

The people who had entered the gas chamber first still didn't notice anything out of the ordinary, but when they heard the screaming and saw the Germans beating people indiscriminately, and when they noticed the dogs that

were standing at the door and the way the Germans attacked and pushed people in so that the chamber would hold more, then they began to grasp it. Those were horrible sights; they make you shudder.

In fact, there were two gas chambers, one for a large number of people and a smaller one for smaller transports.

SHLOMO: Yes, they used two rooms as gas chambers and one as an undressing hall. Each gas chamber had its own door. From the undressing hall a corridor led straight to the door of the large gas chamber, and around the corner was the door to the small gas chamber. The large gas chamber was twice as large as the small one.

ABRAHAM: At first there were three rooms; afterwards, toward the end, they added a fourth. The first could hold 1,400 people, the second about 700, the third about 500, and the fourth about 150.

SHLOMO: At Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V], the gassing was done as it was done in Bunkers I [II] and II [III]. People walked or were trucked to the crematorium building. After they all undressed, they were stuffed into the gas chamber. To let the gas work more efficiently and quickly, they fired up the gas chamber before the transport arrived. For this purpose they started up a coke-burning stove that didn't give off any smell. When the transport came, the stoves were removed from the gas chamber. The ceiling of the gas chambers was not high. That way, the chambers would warm up faster and the gas would have more concentrated effect.

The gas chamber really did look like a shower room. There were shower heads on the ceiling. The room was painted white and had lighting. The gas chambers in Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] were about two and a half meters high, so you couldn't touch the ceiling by putting your hand up. It was about fifty centimeters from the lintel of the door to the ceiling. A person of average height could reach the lower edge of the opening that they used to throw the Zyklon gas in, if he put out his hand.

The doors and openings at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] were just like those at the bunkers: they were made of thick, heavy wood and the slots in the wood were covered with strips of felt. To make the whole thing airtight, the doors were locked by means of double metal handles and bolts. All the doors of the gas chambers had glass peepholes.

ABRAHAM: The gas chamber had a lower ceiling than the undressing hall. The Germans wanted the gas to spread through the big room fast and act fast.

SHLOMO: The moment the gas chamber filled up, the SS man closed the door. When we were working there, *Oberscharführer* Moll usually did this himself. The doors of the gas chamber were as thick as the doors of a walk-in refrigerator. Right after that, SS men drove over in a car that carried the

emblem of the Red Cross. The cans of gas were taken out of the car and opened, and their contents were thrown into the gas chamber through the opening in the wall.

How was the gas thrown into the chamber? Who took this action?

SHLOMO: From the side. At the top of the wall were two openings or windows made out of thick, sealed wood. The gas was thrown in from there. The SS man threw the gas through the opening into the gas chamber. The opening was high up on the wall; he had to climb up a little ladder to get to it. He wore a gas mask throughout the whole operation.

Some time later, the SS doctor determined the death of the people in the chamber by saying, "It's all over." Then he drove away in the "Red Cross" car.

Did you ever have a chance to see the gas being thrown in?

ABRAHAM: Yes, I saw it once. Obviously they didn't want us to see it. Even so, I saw it once.

Tell me what you remember.

SHLOMO: Whenever a transport came, a car with the Red Cross symbol stood at the platform. The cans of gas were in the car. As soon as the selection was over, the people were driven to the gas chamber. The car went there, too. Once the people were in the gas chamber, the cans of gas were removed from the car and opened with a special tool. I saw how the SS man pushed the opener with his foot. The contents were thrown into the gas chamber and the people inside inhaled the gas for about ten to fifteen minutes. Instinctively they ran toward the door. At first you heard pounding; those were the people who hadn't died right away. But the Germans waited until everything was silent. As soon as the screaming and pounding stopped, the Germans got into the car and drove away.

ABRAHAM: Yes, after the car with the Red Cross came, they opened the cans that contained the granules of Zyklon. The cans looked like big cans of pickles. They were made of metal and opened by the SS man with a special can opener. The contents of the can were thrown in.[47]

Did the SS man keep the can with him?

ABRAHAM: Yes.

Did you see this?

ABRAHAM: Yes, from the side.

How did the Germans get to the gas chamber?

ABRAHAM: They came in the Red Cross car and they also drove back in that car when the operation was over.

Did Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] have the same layout?

ABRAHAM: They were built in the same style but with the sides reversed.

Was the layout of Crematoria I [II] and II [III] different?

SHLOMO: Yes. I [II] and II [III] had a cellar; Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] had only one floor and everything took place on at one level. Crematoria I [II] and II [III] had no shutters and the gas chambers had openings in the ceilings that were closed with a concrete lid.

How were the bodies removed from the gas chamber?

ABRAHAM: By hand, with belts. We tied the belt to the hands or feet of the body and dragged it out. You couldn't grip the body with your hands because it was slippery.[48] When the people in the gas chamber began to do their work, we moved the clothing aside to make room for the bodies.

SHLOMO: When Moll opened the door to the gas chamber, we put on the masks and began to drag the bodies out of the gas chamber down the narrow corridor back to the undressing hall—the dressing room—and from there down the corridor to the furnaces.

ABRAHAM: The floor of the gas chamber was made of concrete, so it was rather easy to drag the bodies. But here you had to drag them farther than at the pits.

SHLOMO: At the first corridor, the one next to the main door, the barbers cut the hair. At the second corridor, the "dentists" ripped out the gold teeth and removed the rings from the bodies. Afterwards we dragged them to the furnaces.

Where were the furnaces at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]?

SHLOMO: The furnaces were on the right-hand side, the gas chambers were on the left, and the undressing hall was in the middle.

How many furnaces did Crematorium III [IV] have?

SHLOMO: There were eight furnaces.

Did you ever get a close look at the furnaces?

SHLOMO: Yes.

What did they look like?

SHLOMO: The fire under the furnaces was stoked with coke or some other form of coal. The furnaces themselves were positioned farther up. The furnace doors were also higher. The lid was very heavy and shaped like a semicircle. There was a metal stretcher there and the bodies were placed on it. We pushed the stretcher with the bodies into the fire and pulled the stretcher out.

We arranged the bodies on the iron stretcher. The legs of the stretcher had wheels; that's how we pushed the bodies into the furnace. We had to arrange the bodies in groups of three: two of them lying parallel, their heads next to each other, and the third body lying with its feet next to the heads of the other two.

By the time the third body was laid on the stretcher, half of the two other bodies were already in the furnace and they began to catch fire. The heat was

so great that their hands and feet shriveled and their limbs lurched upward and contracted quickly. This made it hard to place the third body on the stretcher, so we had to move quickly. Two prisoners lifted the stretcher at the end that was far from the furnace. After we wheeled the stretcher close to the furnace, one of the prisoners held the bodies with a rake that he used as though it were a pitchfork, and two other prisoners pulled the stretcher away from under the bodies.

As soon as the furnace was full, the lid was closed and we turned to the next furnace. The fire lasted fifteen to twenty minutes. Then the lid was opened and additional bodies were placed in the furnace.

What was done with bones that did not burn?[49]

SHLOMO: Next to Crematorium III [IV] there was a concrete floor about ten square meters in area. That's where they brought remains that wouldn't burn. Several Sonderkommando men had to pulverize the bones with chunks of wood. The ashes were loaded onto a truck and scattered in the river. When the transports got to be fewer, we were drafted for the *Abbruchkommando,* the "demolition detail."[50]

Are you willing to explain?

SHLOMO: In the town of Oswiecim there were old houses, and to keep us busy all the time they'd bring us there for work. I also asked the Kapo to give me that job because there were chances to escape from there. Once we were there, we looked for places we could escape to but we didn't find any way to do it and anywhere to go.

What work did they make you do there?

ABRAHAM: Knocking down old buildings. As I understood it, they made people do this work just to keep them busy and so they wouldn't wander around idle. We knew additional transports would come and we'd be called back to our regular work. They called the demolition work the *Abbruchkommando*.

SHLOMO: Whenever there were no transports, I was also assigned to the demolition groups. I worked near Crematorium IV [V]. Until May 1944 I did gardening jobs, split rails, or hauled coke for the cremation. They gave me these jobs because Crematorium IV [V] was shut down for some time. Crematorium IV [V] wasn't reactivated until May 1944, when the transports from Hungary came.

At which crematorium did you work, Abraham?

ABRAHAM: We worked together at Crematorium IV [V]. We lived at Crematorium III [IV]. We worked at Crematorium III [IV] only when there was lots of work. Crematorium III [IV] was on one side of the camp "street"; Crematorium IV [V] was on the other side.

Did the Germans keep Crematorium III [IV] surrounded?

SHLOMO: There were always guards at the building, especially when the people went out to work.

ABRAHAM: Everything was fenced in and quarantined.

In other words, not everyone could come or go as he pleased.

SHLOMO: Entering was absolutely forbidden, even for Germans who didn't hold official permits.

Did you have to report for roll calls? Where were the roll calls held?

ABRAHAM: Yes, roll call took place in the closed yard, separate from the rest. When it was roll call time, the registrar came and checked the people. He never trusted our block elder, who also had to count the people. Roll calls took place between the end of the work day and supper. When one of us was missing, they sometimes made all the groups stand all night long on the roll call grounds next to the block until the missing prisoner was found.

SHLOMO: In 1942–43, we were no better off than the rest of the camp prisoners. In 1943, the situation changed—they didn't beat us and we were given more food.

Who used to beat you before the situation changed in 1943?

SHLOMO: The SS men and, sometimes, Moll himself. We were flogged if we didn't stand in a straight line; we were flogged when we didn't march as fast as they demanded; we were flogged when we didn't line up fast enough; we were flogged without hesitation. The registrar's name was Schillinger.[51] He ran the camp. Moll and Schillinger ran the crematoria. Schillinger always flogged people.

Did the German officers regularly push you to work faster?

ABRAHAM: No, because the work couldn't be done faster than we were doing it. After all, once the bodies were placed in the furnaces, we had to wait until they were incinerated.

Did you have bathrooms or showers?

ABRAHAM: There was only one shower in the whole camp, but for us they built showers and latrines in the yard of Block 2. The Sauna, where they disinfected the clothing, was the only place that had hot water.

Please describe relations between the Sonderkommando and the Germans who worked in the crematoria. Were there relations of any kind? Who was in charge of you when you worked at the bunker, and who was in charge at the crematoria?

ABRAHAM: Hössler was in charge, and other Germans, too.

SS men?

ABRAHAM: Yes, they were all SS men. There were permanent shifts that worked with us. When we went out to work, there were SS men next to the

block. They led us out and brought us back. The *Scharführer* who sent me to the infirmary wing because I was injured during the uprising was with us for a long time, so he knew me well. When transports came, they changed shifts.

Were there Germans or SS men with whom you had personal relations?

ABRAHAM: No, there were no personal relations. There couldn't be. The Germans didn't allow it. After all, they were also afraid of us. There was one Jew from France in the Sonderkommando, named Daniel. Daniel had a huge amount of money with him and he tried to escape with the help of an SS man with whom he'd formed a relationship. When he was caught, he denounced the SS man and both of them were executed.

You said that no personal relationships formed. If so, how did they address you when they wanted something from you?

ABRAHAM: We had numbers; there were no names. Eighty-three thousand sixty was my number and also my name. I could remember it for years afterwards.

Did they ever address you by your surname?

ABRAHAM: No, they never called me Dragon. Only friends called each other by name.

Did you obtain information from the Germans even though you had no personal relations?

ABRAHAM: Our Kapo, Kaminski, spoke with them more than all the others put together. Kaminski related things that it would have been better not to say. And what did they do with him in the end? They murdered him. Executed him.[52] You couldn't trust anyone. We weren't afraid of dying but we were afraid of being harassed.

Can you provide some details?

ABRAHAM: I wasn't afraid of the possibility that they'd kill me but I was afraid of harassment and torture. Some gold was found on one of the Sonderkommando prisoners. They interrogated him, wanting to know the name of the person who'd given him the gold, where he got he gold. But he said nothing and denounced no one. You can't imagine the torture he went through! Moll came over and dragged him to the furnace. He burned his head, and before he died they made him run into the fence. He ran into the fence and took a fatal electric shock. Moll did that to teach the rest of us a lesson. This was in 1944.

Burns, beatings, and making people run into the electric fence. Death itself was meaningless for us, but being tortured to death was the great problem that all of us feared.

SHLOMO: Kaminski remains etched in my memory. He was the chief Kapo—our *Oberkapo*. With my own eyes I saw Moll ordering him to go behind the block. Afterwards I heard a gunshot. Moll returned and asked for two volun-

teers. Monjek Friedman stood next to me, and I volunteered for the task with him. We had to walk behind the block to gather up Kaminski's corpse.

SHLOMO: Moll managed the work at the crematorium. His henchmen were the commanders of the SS detail, "Moishe Burak"[53] and "Schmekel Dondak." "Kurzschluss"[54] and "Guts," among others, were there during the shift. The person in charge of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] and Bunker 2 was *Oberscharführer* Moll. Moll was a man of average height, bursting with health. He parted his blond hair to the side. He had a left eye of glass. He was about thirty-seven years old. His wife lived with their ten-year-old son and seven-year-old daughter in the town of Oswiecim.

ABRAHAM: When we worked at the pits, Moll was our boss. He didn't join the groups whenever they went out to work. Next to him was *Oberscharführer* Hössler, who was also assigned to the Sonderkommando.

Can you describe the tortures that Moll meted out?

ABRAHAM: Everyone was afraid of Moll. He was a terrible man. He wasn't afraid of us and tried out his lunacies on us. He wouldn't have breakfast until he had beaten up someone from the Sonderkommando or one of the other prisoners. He was capable of taking a human being, stuffing a skewered potato into his mouth, and shooting at the potato. The thought that he might hurt or kill the man didn't bother him.

SHLOMO: Moll was a powerful man, always dressed in a jacket, a handgun jammed into his pocket. Sometimes we'd wait in the yard of Crematorium IV [V] for a transport to arrive. To amuse himself, Moll would pull someone out of the line, jam a burning cigarette into his mouth, and try to put out the cigarette with gunshots—first with his right hand, then with his left. Shooting left-handed, he would miss the target and kill the man. Without a moment's delay he would pull another man out of the line to continue playing the game. He chose the live targets absolutely at random. I remember another man who was murdered the same way. We called him "Boxer" because he was short and solidly built.

ABRAHAM: Moll was always beating someone up. He had this urge to beat up people around him.

SHLOMO: No one dared to resist him, even in the slightest way, since we knew that we'd all be killed. Mere mention of the name Moll was enough to make everyone quake. Moll had another job: to take all the old and sick people who'd came in the trucks to a place behind Crematorium IV [V]. There, in one of the pits, a fire was burning. He gave an order to throw the people into the fire and burn them alive. He was just a sadist.

How did Moll address you?

ABRAHAM: "Eighty-three thousand sixty, report!"

SHLOMO: "Eighty-three thousand fifty-nine." Sometimes he called me "Langer" ["Tall Man"] because I was pretty tall.

ABRAHAM: Sometimes he called us "the two brothers" because we always worked together. We never took a step apart. That was our good luck.

Do you have memories of additional SS men?

SHLOMO: Yes, I remember Steinmetz,[55] the man who threw the Zyklon B gas from the cans into the gas chamber. He had a little ladder and he'd climb up it to get to the opening. Sometimes other SS men did this; I don't remember their names but I remember the name Steinmetz very well because at first he was in charge of our Sonderkommando group. I didn't know his first name. He was also of average height, a little shorter than me, blond, about twenty-six years old. They provided him with girls in return for various services.

Do you remember how many Jews arrived in each transport?

ABRAHAM: There were about two thousand people in each transport, sometimes more, sometimes less.

From what places had these Jews been sent?

SHLOMO: Many transports came from Poland. Other transports came from France, Holland, and Czechoslovakia. Sometimes smaller groups came, too. I remember a group of twenty partisans. They didn't take them to the gas chamber. It wasn't worth the Germans' while. They were shot. But little groups like that were uncommon.

ABRAHAM: Transports came from Poland, Italy, Hungary, Germany, France, Norway, Austria, Belgium, Holland, and Greece—really, from all over Europe. That's why they assigned us to this work and kept us alive.

Did you have prior knowledge about the origins of the transports?

ABRAHAM: In most cases, we didn't know. But once the people reached the undressing hall, we could ask them and they told us where they'd come from.

SHLOMO: For the most part, I wasn't in the undressing hall when the people came. Other Sonderkommando workers told me where the transports were from.

Which transport do you remember best from the time that you worked in the undressing hall?

SHLOMO: I'll tell you about a strange transport that came in late 1943 or early 1944. At that time, many transports were arriving and the barrack room duty people had to take part in the work. One day, a very strange transport arrived. We'd never seen anything like it before. The people in it looked different from the Jews who came from the ghettos. They wore fancy clothing and showed no signs of having been subjected to severe poverty. They were well outfitted. Some of the women wore fur coats and gold jewelry. They had leather purses of various kinds. Very refined. They looked as though they'd come from a totally different world.

Where were these Jews from?

SHLOMO: At first we didn't know. They spoke English and French. Later we heard that they were American and French citizens who just happened to be in Poland when the war broke out. The Germans arrested them and sent them to a concentration camp.

How many people were in the group?

SHLOMO: Between 120 and 200.

How were they taken to the crematorium?

SHLOMO: In trucks, like the others, but not like the earlier transports. At first, they were treated courteously and pleasantly.

Where did you see these people when they came?

SHLOMO: In the yard of Crematorium I [II].

What were you doing there?

SHLOMO: It was at the time when the Germans made the barrack room duty people go to the crematoria. They dispersed us to all the buildings. We were always taken to the crematoria in situations like these, when the workload was the greatest.

Please continue. Tell us what became of this strange transport.

SHLOMO: It was a special transport for us. They led the people to the cellar of Crematorium I [II], where they undressed. When many of them were already in the gas chamber and the others were still undressing—that is, before the door of the gas chamber was closed on them—the Sonderkommando men were ordered to gather up the things that were left in the undressing hall. An elegantly dressed woman was standing in the room with her daughter. Schillinger of the SS was in the room at the time. The woman didn't want to undress totally and kept her bra and underpants on. Schillinger turned to her and roared, "No! No! Undress all the way!" and he pointed his handgun at her bra. The woman undid her bra, waved it in his face, and hit him on the arm. His handgun fell to the floor. The woman bent down quickly, grabbed the gun, aimed it at Schillinger, and shot him.[56]

Who was this Schillinger?

SHLOMO: He was the *Rapportführer* (registrar) of the camp. An especially cruel man. We didn't envy anyone who fell into his clutches. Schillinger beat people left and right and was a terrible, horrific sadist.

Did you know if he murdered people with his own hands?

SHLOMO: It goes without saying. He was known throughout the camp as a murderer.

Did he hit you, too?

SHLOMO: Yes, he hit me, too.

Let's go back to this episode of the woman and Schillinger. What happened afterwards?

SHLOMO: A tumult broke out in the undressing hall. The Germans were afraid that she'd point the handgun at them, too. They removed everyone from the undressing hall and shot her. Only then did they let the Sonderkommando prisoners return to the undressing hall. On the floor, the woman's body was sprawled next to Schillinger's. When word of Schillinger's death spread, the camp erupted in joy. When we returned to the camp, to the Sonderkommando barracks, and told them about Schillinger's death, there was a real celebration there.

How far were you from the woman when this happened?

SHLOMO: I was very close to her, maybe five meters away. There weren't many people left in the room by that time, and the woman was one of the last ones. So I got a close-up view of what happened.

Did you know who the woman was?

SHLOMO: They told us that she was an actress, but we never found out any clear details.

You worked there at the time the Germans were murdering the Jews of Hungary. Do you remember exactly how matters unfolded?

SHLOMO: In the middle of May 1944, the gassing and cremation of the Jews of Hungary began at Crematorium IV [V]. The people in the first transports from Hungary were burned at Crematorium III [IV] because the machinery at Crematorium IV [V] was wasn't working correctly. When the transports were brought to Birkenau, the bodies of the Hungarian Jews were cremated in furnaces and also in huge pits. For that purpose, pits were dug out next to Crematorium IV [V]. They could burn thousands of bodies per day in these pits. The transports of Hungarian Jews were so large that they had to reactivate Bunker 2. At the pits next to Crematorium IV [V], Moll was our boss. The ashes from the pits were taken out in the same way as they were removed from the bunkers. They were compressed along with the remains of the bones and taken in containers to the river. At first, the ashes from the crematoria were buried in pits that were dug especially for this purpose. Later on, as the Red Army approached, the commander of the camp, Höss, gave orders to remove the ashes from the pits and scatter them in the river. I don't know how many people were cremated at the bunker, since I wasn't working there at the time.

All the crematoria worked in two shifts, day shift and night shift, from six in the morning to six in the evening and from six in the evening to six in the morning. The work continued in May and June 1944. As I figured it, about 300,000 Hungarian Jews were murdered during those months.[57] The Jews

were sent directly on foot from the railroad platform to Crematorium IV [V]. There were women, men, and children of all ages among them. Some Jews had collapsed on the way so we had to carry them to the cremation place, under SS guard. When that happened, we had a chance to talk with the people we were carrying. Most of them didn't know that they were going to their deaths. When we told them, they didn't believe us. This "work" went on for about three months.

ABRAHAM: I remember that there were two other special camps in Birkenau: the "Gypsy camp"[58] and the "family camp"[59] of Czech Jews who came from Theresienstadt. In the spring of 1944, the Germans removed all the Gypsies from the camp and murdered them. Then they removed the Czech Jews and murdered them, too. Some of the Gypsies had come in German uniform from the front to the camp. There they'd been *Volksdeutsche*—Germans living outside of Germany who'd been drafted into the army. They even held German passports. But the Germans in the camp sent them all, in their German uniforms, to the crematoria.

What do you remember about the "family camp" of the Czech Jews?

ABRAHAM: There were some real heroes among the Czech Jews. They were willing to take part in an uprising and to die. We hoped that they'd be able to organize something against the Germans. We told them explicitly that they were awaiting death, so that they'd know what the place was about. We warned them in advance.[60] But they were so naïve that they went to the Germans to confirm the information we'd given them. "They told us that we'd be murdered here. Is there any truth to these rumors?" The Germans tried to deny it.

SHLOMO: The Czechs were definitely capable of organizing something against the Germans, since they spent the whole time together with their families in the camp. We were pretty sure that they were setting up an underground and we waited for them to start an uprising against the Germans. There were some really powerful men among them, people who you could rely on. One of us told them that they were going to be put to death. Instead of taking it at face value, they ran to the Germans and asked, "The Sonderkommando prisoners told us that we're going to die. Is it so?" We'd risked our own lives to tell the Czech Jews the truth.

ABRAHAM: I think they didn't believe us, so they ran to the Germans to turn us in.

What happened on the day that these Jews were murdered?

ABRAHAM: I still remember that night. They trucked them from their camp—Camp C—straight to the gas chambers.

SHLOMO: So many Jews arrived that even we had to take part in the work.

During your stay at Birkenau, did it ever occur to you to calculate the number of Jews who were murdered there each and every day?

SHLOMO: My comrades in the Sonderkommando and I thought that millions of people were being murdered at the two bunkers and the four crematoria. Zalman Gradowski of Grodno[61] drew up a list of people who'd been gassed and cremated, on the basis of reports from Sonderkommando prisoners who worked in each of the buildings. He buried the lists in the enclosed compound next to Crematorium II [III]. Just after the camp was liberated, I removed the lists and handed them over to the Soviet investigative commission. The lists were in Hebrew; the commission had all of them translated by a former prisoner, Dr. Gordon. The commission took all the material to the USSR. I know that more lists and records of murdered people were buried in the compound of Crematorium II [III]. The place to look for them is opposite the crematorium furnaces. I don't know exactly where they are, since the place looked different after the crematoria were blown up. Gradowski described the entire murder process. Almost no one knew that he was keeping these records. I was the only one who knew because I did barrack room duty. We let him keep these records even though it was prohibited. I arranged a bed for him next to a window so that he'd have enough light to write by. Only the barrack room duty made these conditions possible.[62]

Did he explain to you why he was keeping these records?

SHLOMO: He told us that the events in the camp had to be documented so that the whole world would know about it. By the time he began to write, we'd already figured that our chances of survival were virtually nil. The Germans were executing groups of Sonderkommando members again and again.[63] No one knew if anyone who'd be able to testify about what happened to us would survive.

Was Gradowski detailed to the jobs that the other Sonderkommando members carried out?

SHLOMO: He worked with us and was part of everything that took place. I'd like to add here that another Jew worked together with him in keeping the records. We called him "the *dayan*" [judge].[64] He was originally from Makow-Mazowiecki. I think we also called him the "Maggid of Makow." Both of them took part in the writing and both slept on the same bunk.

Do you remember how Gradowski kept his writings?

SHLOMO: To the best of my recollection, he wrote in notebooks that we provided for him.

How did Gradowski keep his writings hidden?

SHLOMO: He stuffed the books into glass containers that were reminiscent of thermoses and buried them in all sorts of places. To do that, he developed a unique method.

And you found the bottles in 1945, shortly after the liberation?

SHLOMO: Yes, exactly so.

And was it on the basis of these writings that you testified to the Soviet investigative commission that visited Auschwitz?

SHLOMO: Yes, I gave the Soviet commission all the information I had. I also gave them a camera that I'd managed to hide.

You worked for months and months at the crematoria of Birkenau and you saw transports of Jews almost every day. The people in almost all the transports went to their death shortly after their arrival. Did you reflect about how many?

ABRAHAM: To tell the truth, we didn't believe that a single Jew would survive. We noticed that fewer and fewer Jews were in the transports that came toward the end, and we figured that hardly any Jews remained to send to Auschwitz. We didn't give ourselves a thought. We were sure that we wouldn't make it.

Did you live in the shadow of fear of execution?

ABRAHAM: Yes, always. Now and then we heard rumors about how they were preparing to murder us.

Who spread the rumors?

ABRAHAM: We already knew what had become of the Sonderkommando prisoners before us. We also discovered details about how the murder was done. It was clear to us that all groups of Sonderkommando prisoners were murdered so we were sure that our turn would come. One day, we stayed in the block and the Germans announced that Sonderkommando prisoners would have to do some special work at the crematorium. In the course of that evening, they were all murdered.

Another group of Sonderkommando men was sent off in a railroad car. They were told that they were being sent to a different workplace. Somewhere along the way, they were all put to death, too. Three groups were replaced during our time in the Sonderkommando. When we came, the Germans had murdered all the members of the previous Sonderkommando. This happened while we were in Block 2. The Germans replaced all the Sonderkommando workers in one go. Fortunately for us, that had no effect on the barrack room duty. Later on, a different method was used. The Germans selected about two hundred of the eight hundred Sonderkommando men who worked in all the facilities and murdered them somewhere outside Birkenau. We always hoped that we could survive in order to describe what happened to us. Giving testimony was immeasurably more important than survival itself.

SHLOMO: Until December 1942, most of the Sonderkommando workers were Slovakian Jews. They were murdered in the crematorium of the main

camp, Auschwitz. There were two hundred men in my group; later on, their numbers climbed to four hundred. I remember the names of three—Mandelbaum,[65] Süssner, and Tauber.[66] Two hundred men were sent to Lublin.[67]

Later on, twenty non-Jewish Russians reached us from there. They told us that the two hundred Sonderkommando prisoners who'd been brought to Lublin were murdered. In 1943, they added two hundred Jews from Greece to our group.[68] In 1944, five hundred Hungarian Jews came to the Sonderkommando. In October 1944, during the Sonderkommando uprising, five hundred Sonderkommando prisoners were murdered—four hundred in the yard of Crematorium III [IV] and a hundred in the field next to Crematorium I [II]. That month, Moll selected another two hundred workers from the Sonderkommando and sent them to Auschwitz.

As the "Kanada" Kommando people told us—the ones who sorted belongings that had been stolen from the Jews—these prisoners had been gassed to death in the same building that was used to disinfect the clothing that was taken brought to "Kanada." The disinfection was done with Zyklon B, the same gas that was used to murder the people. In November 1944, a hundred Sonderkommando men were sent to the Gross-Rosen concentration camp.[69] They were sent there as a *Strafkommando,* a penal detail. None of them ever returned.

Who reported the murder of the Sonderkommando prisoners to you?

SHLOMO: We had various sources of information. At first we didn't know a thing about the murder of our friends. As time passed, we heard various rumors. In the case of the workers who'd been sent to Lublin, the Germans spread a report that they'd been sent to Lublin for labor, but in fact they were taken to the Majdanek extermination camp and murdered there. When the Majdanek camp was shut down, five prisoners who had been brought there were transferred to us. They were given the status of chief Kapos. They were non-Jewish Germans and Poles who'd been forced to join our group. These men, who lived in our block, told us from a first-hand source that our friends had been murdered in Majdanek. By the way, one of the German head Kapos was thrown into the furnace during the Sonderkommando uprising.[70]

Your work must have put you to intolerable psychological strain. How did you cope with the reality in which you were forced to live?

ABRAHAM: When the transports came, we fell into deep depression. But I didn't see any tears in anyone's eyes. The tears had long since dried up. That's how we eventually got used to the cruel routine of our lives. We accepted the fact that we were there and not anyone else. We took it as a decree of fate. We didn't feel guilty about it.

You said that you "got used to it." Can a person really get used to this kind of "work"?

ABRAHAM: Unfortunately, people can. If they couldn't, how could they go out to war and shoot human beings? You get used to it. It's especially hard on the first day, but afterwards you get used to it. The first day was the most stressful and terrible of all. It got easier afterward. A doctor also has to get used to all sorts of unpleasant jobs.

Did you ever consider putting the nightmare to an end?

SHLOMO: There were definitely times when we didn't want to continue working. But alongside that feeling, we always continued to hope. Maybe, despite everything, we'd be able to escape. Maybe we'd survive.

Did any of your comrades commit suicide?

SHLOMO: There were several cases where people among us would "run to the fence" in the morning. But not often.

Were there attempts to organize underground actions even before the Sonderkommando uprising?

SHLOMO: While I was doing barrack room duty, we armed ourselves with knives, and when we gathered in the evening in the block, we decided to pounce on the German guards as we went out to work the next the morning and escape through the drainage system. We knew we wouldn't leave Birkenau alive anyway, so we had nothing to lose. I told my friends, "If we don't manage to escape, let's die now instead of next year."

Can you provide further details about preparations for this escape attempt, about which nothing was known until now?

SHLOMO: I rounded up some knives and saws and the idea was to use them to cut down trees and build little boats to cross the drains. We also had rubber cushions that would help us to float in the water. The plan was to lure the SS men who guarded us at night—there were fifteen to twenty of them—and take their weapons. We were sure we could pull it off.

I was one of those who put together the plan, and I told them all that they could trust me. Henryk Fuchsenbrunner of Krakow[71] helped me to organize it; he knew the area well and could plan out the escape route. When I think about the escape plan today, it's clear to me that we didn't have a chance. But back then we had nothing to lose and we knew we wouldn't leave Birkenau alive. So we were prepared to take the risk. But the plan was postponed again and again, and ultimately we never went through with it.

Do you remember the circumstances that prompted the Sonderkommando prisoners in Birkenau to begin to organize an uprising?

SHLOMO: At first, the organizing depended on the situation in the autumn and winter of 1944. At that time, the crematoria didn't need a lot of working

hands. We were several hundred men. At Crematorium III [IV] we were sure we'd be the next in line for gassing and extermination. We thought about an uprising. There were several plans. One was to overcome the Germans during the night watch at the crematorium, put on their uniforms, and escape.

There were other plans, too, but they were not convincing. Again and again we thought the moment had come and maybe we'd succeed this time. But the plans didn't go ahead. It took about a year to organize the uprising. We waited for the situation outside the camp to change in a way that might help us to succeed. We were expecting the Red Army to begin a big offensive. We believed that the uprising could succeed only if the situation outside the camp changed. Later on, when we were already far along in organizing the uprising, we had to postpone it time and again for various reasons. One of the main reasons was the attitude of the non-Jewish participants in the main camp, Auschwitz. All that time, we Sonderkommando prisoners begged them, pleaded with them to start an uprising. But our friends outside of Birkenau thought the time had not yet come. They said, "Not now, the time isn't right yet. We have to be careful. We aren't ready for an uprising yet." Then came October and our situation seemed to be dangerous and threatening. So we decided to wait no longer. What's more, we had no choice.

Was there a plan that the participants in the uprising were told about?

SHLOMO: We wanted to carry out the uprising together with rebels in the Auschwitz I camp. During the uprising, we wanted to blow up the camp and kill the Germans. One of the most important tasks was to turn off the supply of power to the camp and the electric fences. The opportune moment, we decided, was when the labor details from outside—the ones who worked outside the camp—returned to the camp. The Germans were concentrated at the gate of the camp as the prisoners reached it. We were to attack them with hand grenades and other weapons that we had gathered over time. The first zero hour was set for Christmas Eve, when there'd be fewer Germans in the camp since many of them went on furlough. But that zero hour was postponed.

How did you join the uprising, Shlomo?

SHLOMO: At first, I didn't really know a thing about the resistance movement. But some time later I was approached by a member of the underground, a French Jew who'd picked up combat experience in the Spanish Civil War. He wanted to recruit me for the uprising because he thought I was suitable and because I'd been assigned to barrack room duty. For that reason, I had more spare time than the others in the block and could watch over the ammunition. One day, this comrade approached me in the block and asked me to help. "How can I help?" I asked, he answered, "I'll give you various things and you'll watch over them."

When did he contact you?

SHLOMO: It was in late 1943. At first we didn't use the word "munitions" but spoke instead about "things." But after I joined the resistance, he handed me some explosives that were concealed in cans. They were to serve as hand grenades. He did it every now and then—sometimes each day, sometimes once a week. We got the explosives from Jewish women who worked at the Union weapons factory. I hid the improvised hand grenades under my mattress. The Sonderkommando prisoners were among the few prisoners who slept on mattresses. Later on, when the cache of hand grenades became very large, I hid them in the pillar that held up the roof of the building. On the residential level in each crematorium building, there was one prisoner like me who was in charge of hiding the hand grenades. Another prisoner helped me to do this. After they were prepared, we divided up the hand grenades in each of the crematorium buildings. In each building there were Sonderkommando prisoners who belonged to the underground. At first the hand grenades were kept in Block 13, where we lived. Some time later, I brought them to the loft of the crematorium, where we'd moved.

How did you take the hand grenades to the crematorium?

SHLOMO: In pockets. When we left Block 13, we were not inspected.

How many hand grenades did you move?

SHLOMO: About twenty-eight or thirty. Obviously I didn't take them all at once. The people on barrack room duty were in charge of moving from Block 13 to the crematorium. We had to run several times, and I took two hand grenades each time.

Did you, too, Abraham, move hand grenades?

ABRAHAM: No, I didn't take part in the operation.

What else did you conceal in the crematorium?

SHLOMO: A camera, too.

How were you able to manufacture hand grenades under those conditions?

SHLOMO: As I said, we got the explosives from Jewish women who worked in the arms factory. When evening came, at the end of the day of work, as they returned to the block they stuffed small amounts of explosives in the folds of their dresses. The hand grenades were put together in Crematorium I [II], and it was my job to deliver them to Crematorium IV [V]. My liaison from the resistance, the French Jew, told me, "Bring a bundle from Crematorium I [II]. There are some brooms in the bundle that have to be cleaned." To get to Crematorium I [II], I had to cross the open compound. I wasn't allowed to do this without being guarded. So I had a German escort. So along with him I reached Crematorium I [II], where the package was waiting for me. When I picked it up, I noticed that it was too heavy to be a package of brooms. I

hoisted it onto my shoulders and the German returned with me to Crematorium IV [V], where I handed it on to where it had to go.

Weren't you afraid to carry the hand grenades so close to your body? It was a very risky thing to do, wasn't it?

SHLOMO: I wasn't afraid. On the contrary: I was very proud.

Did non-Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners take part in the uprising?

SHLOMO: Yes, a few of them. Among us was a Russian "Polkovnik"[72] who belonged to the resistance. A group of twenty Russian prisoners of officer grade joined us. When they got to Birkenau, they procrastinated when they were told to take off their uniforms. They were taken to the camp commander, who let them move around the camp in their uniforms. The Polkovnik got in touch with them and talked them into helping the uprising. But after they found out that there were too many people who knew about the underground organization, they regretted it and said, "If it's that way, there's no point in it. Too many people know about it. You've got to let as few people as possible know the secret." By that time, they weren't letting new members join the resistance, but fortunately I was already in.

How would you judge the keeping of secrecy back then?

ABRAHAM: Pretty good.

Do you remember the names of your comrades in the resistance?

SHLOMO: I never knew most of the names at all.

Abraham, Did you know that your brother was a member of the resistance?

ABRAHAM: Yes, in a very general way. But he didn't reveal any details. For example, he never told me about the hidden hand grenades. I slept with him on the same bunk with the hand grenades hidden under the mattress, and I never knew a thing about it. Only some time later did he ask me, "Do you know that you're sleeping on hand grenades . . . ?"

SHLOMO: I kept it secret as my liaison instructed me. Nobody was supposed to know about the hand grenades. That's why they made me sleep on the edge of the bed, on the side of the wall, near the hiding place.

Didn't any of the Germans search your beds?

SHLOMO: To be on the safe side, I moved the hand grenades some time later and hid them in a hiding place inside the wall. Apart from that, the Germans usually didn't come into our living quarters. Only we, the barrack room duty people, knew everything. The Germans didn't have direct contact with us, but only with the block elder.

Was the block elder Jewish?

SHLOMO: Yes, the block elder was Jewish. His name was Georges. He didn't know a thing about the hand grenades either.

Can you describe how the uprising proceeded?

SHLOMO: It began in October 1944. They took out our group from Crematorium III [IV] to the yard, and then a selection began. At that time, not many transports were arriving and most of the Sonderkommando prisoners were idle. The Germans wanted to do a selection of a hundred Sonderkommando prisoners. A few of us wanted to start the uprising at once, without waiting for the order, since the preparations had not yet been completed. I said to them: "Until I get the order to take out the hand grenades, we can't begin." The uprising was not yet fully organized. There was no way of informing all members of the resistance of the action. But the moment the decision was made, we began with an attack on the SS men and made use of everything we could put our hands on. We injured twelve people. Apparently, we killed two or three, too.[73]

SS forces immediately came over to the crematorium area, opened fire, and occupied the compound. The rebels set fire to the building by torching the mattresses on the floor building quarters. Because of the fire,[74] I couldn't get near the hideout where the hand grenades were. I was afraid that the grenades that had been stuffed into the wall would explode and then the Germans would find out about the underground. Fortunately, the entire wooden roof collapsed and buried the whole residential floor under it.

So the Germans didn't discover a thing and in the end the hand grenades didn't explode either. We wanted to escape but in fact we were surrounded and couldn't escape—the crematorium was surrounded by an electric fence and the gate was locked. In the course of the uprising, the Germans killed more than five hundred escaped prisoners out of the seven hundred who were at the crematoria.

ABRAHAM: I remember that the uprising broke out after an order was given to do a *Selektion* for a hundred Sonderkommando men. We were standing in the roll call yard of Crematorium III [IV], and we didn't know who was on the list. Some of us were armed with weapons such as iron poles and knives. We knew we had we had nothing to lose, and that the time for action had come. Several of us jumped on the SS men and beat them up. We began to flee as all hell broke out. We didn't know exactly where to turn. The main thing was to get out. The Germans began to fire at us and they hit several of us. We continued to run. There were only two possible directions: to the neighboring Crematorium IV [V] or to the road.

Did the two of you run by yourselves or as part of the group?

ABRAHAM: I ran by myself. Whoever was struck by a bullet was left lying there. The rest of us scattered in every direction. We reached Crematorium IV [V] and didn't know what awaited us. We packed ourselves into the crematorium and tried to hide. We could have died at any moment. Later the Germans

put us all through a head count and ordered four men to step out of line. My brother, I, and two other Sonderkommando men stepped out. The SS men took us away. Even before we left the crematorium area, they fired dumdum bullets at my legs. I fell to the ground and couldn't go on. The SS men gathered round me. Later they put a guard detail next to me so I couldn't escape. This was in the yard of Crematorium IV [V]. I asked the guard, "Why are you watching over me? Shoot me. Then it will be over. You'll be able to go away."

The answer to me in German, "I wasn't ordered to shoot you." And he continued to guard me.

Suddenly an older German who worked in the Sonderkommando came over. He was a good man, sometimes he brought us food. When he saw that I was wounded, he told the people to take me to the camp infirmary. There, I joined a wounded *Volksdeutsche* Kapo and friend, a Sonderkommando man from Greece, who were already there. There was a Jewish surgeon from the hospital in Warsaw working in the infirmary and he helped me.

What was the doctor's name?

ABRAHAM: Hayman or Hermann, I don't remember exactly. I asked him to give me something to help me die. He answered, "Now you are here and you don't have to be afraid. Nothing bad will happen to you here." He operated on me, disinfected and dressed the wound, and I stayed in the infirmary.

What happened to the two of you after the uprising was put down?

SHLOMO: After I reached the area of Crematorium IV [V], I hid out for a while behind a pile of rocks. My friend Tauber was hiding in the smokestack of the crematorium. At that time the Germans were still busy killing the rebels who had remained alive. And then the Germans brought back another hundred survivors or so to Crematorium III [IV], since there were still bodies there for cremation. I made contact with my brother, who was lying in the infirmary, wounded. Those who hadn't been shot were interrogated by the Germans, but no one squealed. We pretended to know nothing.

Abraham, what happened while you were in the hospital?

ABRAHAM: I recovered slowly. Then one day they did a *Selektion* in the hospital. The Germans asked each patient why he had been put there. When my turn came I said, that I was a member of the Sonderkommando, and then they said, "You stay here."

What kinds of work were done in Crematorium IV [V] shortly before the Germans evacuated it?

SHLOMO: Crematorium IV [V] worked almost until the last days of Birkenau. It was blown up shortly before the Germans left the camp. During that time, they only cremated the bodies of prisoners who died or were murdered in the camp, since the flow of transports had stopped. There were three prisoners

working at the crematorium, at the time: the rest were taking apart Crematoria I [II] and II [III]. From November 1944, I also took part in the dismantling. We were ordered to move the instruments and facilities to the Gross-Rosen camp. I also took part in taking apart Crematorium III [IV], which had gone up in flames in the uprising. We pulled down the walls and some of the ironwork. I lived at Crematorium II [III] until November 1944. Afterwards, the entire group of Sonderkommando prisoners, which was still assigned to the work, was taken to Camp BIId. We used Block 3 as our living quarters.

When were you informed that the camp was being dismantled?

ABRAHAM: A few days before the evacuation that took place on January 18, 1945. That day, we were standing there, ready to go out. And then suddenly the order "Sonderkommando, back to the barracks!" was given, which was an ominous sign for us. We realized right away what it meant: we'd be executed that night. We fled the block as the order "Everyone out. Everyone out of the camp!" was heard in the camp, and took the opportunity to leave the camp. At first we walked to Auschwitz. Here the SS man Hössler was still trying to "hunt" us. Later on, the death march began. Because of my injury, it was very hard for me to walk. I had a cousin at Auschwitz who worked at the laundry. There they had a laundry cart. He took the cart and seated me in it. The other members, who set out with us, pushed the cart during the whole entire death march with me sitting inside. The Germans agreed to this since they used the cart too: they loaded it with all the equipment of the guards who were assigned to watch over us.

At the end of the first day we reached the little town of Pszczyna. We spent the night at the football stadium. The next day we carried on. I said to my brother, Shlomo "I see they're going to kill me here, in the middle of the road. But you have a chance to escape, do it, so at least one of us will stay alive."

And that's what happened. As we marched, my brother Shlomo and Fuchsenbrunner, who had served in the Polish army and was therefore familiar with the roads along the way, escaped.

They just stepped out of line and turned right without looking back to see if any of the Germans had noticed their escape. The Germans didn't notice a thing. Maybe it was hard to tell prisoners and civilians apart. They fled without being fired at. That's how my brother managed to escape.

My friends carried me on until we got to a train. We were loaded onto the train. In the meantime, winter had arrived and it was snowing heavily. We traveled for two days without knowing exactly where to. The cars were not roofed, we didn't get a thing to eat, and we were lying on top of each other. Many of us jumped out of the windows and tried to escape. The trip ended at Mauthausen. There we spent another night on our feet until we were placed in a shack.

When it came my turn, I saw that some of the prisoners had been marked with the letters "KL." I was sure they'd take me to the crematorium, because I'd been marked with those letters too. Instead, the Germans sent the people who had them to the infirmary. There we lay, without being given anything that could be described as food. Once a day we got a little soup, that's all. I spent about three months there. During all that time, the thought that I was about to die never left me and I asked myself what the hell I was doing there.

One day—I think it was in March—the Germans selected several prisoners for work. I was one of them. We had to fix railroad tracks that had been damaged in the American bombardments. There were a few cans of preserved food and we ate a little. A week later, they ordered us to stop working and took us to Ebensee, my last stop before the liberation. I lived in a barracks that was reserved for prisoners who didn't go out to work. I was scared to death of the *Lagerälteste,* a *Volksdeutscher* named Danisch.[75] He was a real bastard. I remembered him from my time in Birkenau, where he'd headed the *Strafkommando,* the penal detail. Everyone hated him. He remembered me as a Sonderkommando prisoner, and I was afraid that he'd turn me in. I tried to avoid him all that time. They sent me to work in an underground factory in the mountains. I worked there for a day or two but I couldn't go on because of my injury. Instead, I stayed in the barracks. On Saturday night the Germans announced that we'd have to go into hiding because of the aerial bombardments. Afterwards, the head Kapo came and ordered us to stay where we were. That night, we suddenly noticed that the SS men had disappeared and only the Wehrmacht soldiers stayed around. The Americans reached the camp that very night.

By then, the camp was in total chaos. The Russians also came to look for weapons. They shoved their way into the barracks of the SS crews and found weapons there. When they also found Danisch, they killed him on the spot. In the meantime, we prisoners went out to look for bread. We found a bakery and several loaves of bread in the oven. They divided us into various camps—a Polish camp, a French camp, and so on. They distributed lots of food to us, too much. The prisoners came down with dysentery and many died from overeating.

How did you find your brother again?

ABRAHAM: A friend came to the camp one day and said, "Come, let's go to Poland." I answered, "I'm not going back to Poland. I hate the Poles. I never want to see them again."

My friend found his wife, returned to Poland, and settled in Sierpc. My brother Shlomo had been living twenty kilometers from there, in Zuromin, since January. My friend was the first person to indicate to Shlomo that I was still alive.

In other words, your brother had gone back to your hometown and looked for you there?

ABRAHAM: Yes. He went back. But he didn't want to stay there because he hadn't found any living relatives there. He stayed around to see what remained of the family property and reclaim what the Poles had taken. He was at a loose end until he ran into this friend of mine who told him that I'd survived.

In the meantime, I was on my way to Palestine via Italy. I reached Italy on July 18, 1945, and stayed there for three months. This was shortly before we sailed to Palestine. On the train to Rome, where I went to get a little money from the Joint (American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee), an acquaintance told me, "Your brother went to Germany." When I heard the good news, I didn't return to Santa Caruzzi. Instead, I went to Germany to be reunited with my brother there. I crossed the Italian border into Austria and went to Salzburg. There I met Moshe Friedmann, a friend from the Sonderkommando.

"Stay with us," he suggested, "and we'll look for your brother together." Friedmann helped me a lot. He went to the mayor of Salzburg, who'd also been in a camp, and asked him to get me a room. I was housed in a room together with two other men. I began to send letters to Frankfurt to find out if there was any information about my brother, Shlomo Dragon. One of those letters reached him by pure luck. After that, we met in Austria. From then on, we haven't parted ways.

Shlomo, do you remember how you decided to escape during the death march?

SHLOMO: I was in Block 13 in Camp BIId until January 1945. After that, we were taken to Block 16, from which we set out on foot on January 25, 1945. Almost all the Sonderkommando men who had survived to that time—about a hundred men—left Auschwitz on this march. They included Shmuel from France, Leibl from Grodno, Lemke Pliszko, David Nencel from Rypin, Moshe and Yankl Weingarten from Poland, Aba from Grodno, Berl Beirach from Luna, Sender from Berlin, Maurice from Greece, Leon Cohen from Salonika, and Shaul Chazan from Salonika. There were others, but I no longer remember their names.

We marched for many kilometers. I felt that I had to get away before it was too late. The prisoners whom I'd come to know from the underground in Birkenau knew that I was brave enough to escape and that I was capable of taking the necessary risk. Given a chance, I'd escape without hesitating.

I disclosed my intention of escaping to a few of my comrades. Every now and then they'd ask me, "Shlomo, when are you going to run away?" "Not yet" I'd answer. "The time isn't right yet." I wasn't familiar enough with the surroundings and I didn't know exactly where we were. On the other hand, I

knew that I'd die soon and I couldn't afford to take my time looking for the right opportunity. I saw what happened to other prisoners on the death march: many of them were shot while they were marching and fell in the ditches along the road. I was afraid that if the march continued, it would be my turn to get shot. Why get murdered that way? I wanted to take the chance and spare myself an unnecessary bullet.

One morning we set out at ten o'clock, guarded by armed Germans on both sides. As I marched, I suddenly saw a path that broke away from the main road and led to a village. Fuchsenbrunner said, "Shlomo, this may be your chance."

Right then, I told my brother, "Abraham, I'm going to head down that path, even if I get shot. I want to escape." It was obvious to me that that the Germans would shoot at me in such a case, but I was determined to try. The compound was packed with Germans and the likelihood of evading their bullets was very small. Be that as it may, I swerved onto the side path and began to flee. No one shot at me at all.

How could this be? How did you explain it to yourself?

SHLOMO: It was simply a miracle; I can't explain it any other way. Everyone who was around me back then and those who are still alive didn't understand. They still don't understand it! The Germans didn't fire a shot.

Did you escape alone?

SHLOMO: No, Fuchsenbrunner came with me.

Did you run or walk?

SHLOMO: We walked at an ordinary pace. We walked to the village slowly, as if we were civilians coming home. We didn't want to arouse suspicion. I think that's why the Germans didn't shoot at us. They may have thought that we belonged to the local population and didn't want to injure civilians unnecessarily. We must have been very sure of ourselves, and this convinced them that we hadn't been among the prisoners in the death march.

How long did you walk that way?

SHLOMO: For about ten minutes. Then I dared to turn around. I saw the marchers in the distance. But no one chased us; it was as thought we'd been forgotten. We continued to walk until we reached a river. I wanted to cross it but then I saw that it was sewage. For lack of choice, we went into the freezing water anyway. As I was crossing the river I suddenly sank but I summoned the last of my strength to make it to the opposite bank, where we saw a forest. After we took a few steps, we heard voices speaking in German. We got out of there fast and moved toward the village. A few minutes later, we came to a house, went inside, and found a woman and children there. I assume that she knew who we were given our appearance and, especially, the terrible stink that we gave off. It's very likely that others who'd escaped from the death march had preceded us. The villagers had various ways of identifying them.

How did the woman react when she saw the two of you?

SHLOMO: She was afraid to help us and began to shout. We had nothing to lose. I held a knife close to her neck and threatened her: "If you open your mouth, I'll kill you right here."

Where did you get a knife?

SHLOMO: I picked it up from her table. So we held the woman and the children hostage until the evening.

Did she try to call for help?

SHLOMO: Yes, but she realized rather quickly that we wouldn't hesitate to stab her if she didn't help us. I made the woman and the children sit in a corner and told them, "You'll stay here until the evening. You better not open your mouths!" That evening, we got out of there. We decided to leave the village. We walked all night long and reached Pszczyna in the morning. We didn't want to stop there, so we walked at least fifteen kilometers along the railroad track until we came to an isolated farmhouse. There was a huge haystack next to it and we hid in it. Pretty soon, however, a watchdog found us. The farmer came with a lantern and ordered us out. We obeyed and identified ourselves as Poles. We explained to him that the Germans had forced us to hand over to our horses and wagons and that we had to escape. The farmer led us into his home.

The heating in the house was on. Inside, the farmer noticed the stench that wafted from our clothes. He asked us why we stank so badly and we told him that we hadn't been able to take a bath for a long time. We spent the whole night sitting with him and making up stories. The next day, he took us to a dairy. . . .

What happened from the day you found each other to the time you decided to move to Palestine?

SHLOMO: I went to Germany in late 1945; Abraham got there later. At first, we were in the Salzheim camp, near Frankfurt, and later on we were in Frankfurt itself. We reached Israel in late 1949.

Did you make the trip to Israel together?

ABRAHAM: Sure. Since the liberation, we've done everything together. We lived together, in the same apartment—my wife and I and my brother Shlomo. Except for the time that my brother escaped from the death march, we've never been apart!

After you settled in Israel, did you tell anyone about your work in the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: At first we didn't tell a soul. We just didn't want to tell.

Why? Can you explain this?

ABRAHAM: Truth to tell, I was ashamed. The Israelis treated Sonderkommando men suspiciously. They didn't understand the ghastly reality in which

we had to live. They didn't understand that we hadn't chosen this terrifying "job" for ourselves. People here didn't realize that it was fate that stuck us in the hell that's known as Auschwitz. In fact, it's mainly due to us that people know what happened there, in the inferno of the undressing halls and the gas chambers. Imagine, if none of us had survived, the world wouldn't know how a million and a half Jews were murdered in Birkenau. We hadn't joined the Sonderkommando of our own free will. Fate put us there. There was nothing enviable about it; we had no way out. Believe me, it was the worst job you could wish on anyone. My brother thinks so, too.

SHLOMO: I second every word that my brother said. The feelings that he described are his own and mine, too. Therefore, they are also the feelings of all the Sonderkommando survivors.

ABRAHAM: I'd like to add that anyone who knew me well knew my story. I told good acquaintances about what had happened to me, but not others. What for? People rush to the wrong conclusion, especially in a field as sensitive as the Holocaust. We wanted to avoid additional pain.

Why do you think some people looked askance at the Sonderkommando?

SHLOMO: They must have thought that we'd been the murderers, that we'd murdered those people with our own hands, that we are the guilty ones, and that we committed those crimes at our own initiative. People weren't interested enough to know what went on in Auschwitz and thought that we'd been complicit in the crimes. This is a terrible absurdity. The truth is that we were forced to work for the Germans. We had no choice but to obey. We didn't spill that blood, the Germans did. We were just their playthings. They are the arch-murderers and they deserve the most severe punishment, including for what they did to us. They forced Jews to burn the bodies of fellow Jews; they forced Jews to grind their remains into dust; they forced Jews to drag the corpses of their brethren out of the gas chambers. This is the Germans' great crime.

When did you sense that the attitude toward you had changed? When did you find people more willing to listen to what you'd gone through?

ABRAHAM: In the 1960s, the documentation department at Yad Vashem contacted us for the first time and asked us to document our story. "We've been trying to find you for a long time," they said. "We'd like you to help us tell the world what happened in Auschwitz. You're the only eyewitnesses. Don't be afraid; you can be proud of what you accomplished in the Sonderkommando uprising." After that, we began to tell people who were interested everything that we'd experienced in the Sonderkommando. We felt that people had begun to look at us in a different light, that the public was displaying an understanding of our tragic situation in the camp. Eventually it became easier for us to tell the public about our lives in Auschwitz.

In the meantime, have you managed to find inner peace? Or do you still have unhealed wounds?

ABRAHAM: What happened there will remain in our hearts and souls forever. We will never be able to rid ourselves of the memories of Birkenau. What is more, the public attitude has not yet changed totally. I'll give you an example. Four years ago, while we were vacationing in Tiberias, a woman survivor of Auschwitz began to tell everyone what she'd gone through while she'd been a prisoner in the camp. Among other things, she said, "The Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners were the murderers and ought to be punished. They were almost as cruel as the Germans." I'd heard things like that in the past and they remain somewhat common to this day. However, we don't believe the majority still thinks this way. All we can do is hope that the main thing about our work in Birkenau is understood correctly—that we weren't the ones responsible for the Final Solution of the "Jewish problem."

Did you tell your family about your work in the Sonderkommando?

ABRAHAM: My wife knows the details of the story. So do my children and their friends. I told them the story, leaving nothing out, and they're proud of me. They have no negative thoughts about me. I didn't hide anything from them, and I think in this case that I did the smart thing. I'm not ashamed of what happened. Shlomo thinks the same way.

And in retrospect . . . ?

ABRAHAM: When I reflect on it, I wonder how we managed to endure that hell. How lucky we were to have survived. The fact that my brother and I are among the living is the sweetest revenge there could be.

4

Ya'akov Gabai: "I'll Get Out of Here!"

Regrettably, I must write about Ya'akov Gabai in the past tense. He died while I was conducting the research for this book.

Ya'akov Gabai lived in Neveh Yamin, a small moshav—a cooperative farming community—near Kefar Sava, half an hour from Tel Aviv. Due to sheer laziness, I did not visit him as often as I should have. Today I regret that I can no longer meet and converse with him. He took some of his memories of the Sonderkommando to his grave. My only consolation is the exceptional fruitfulness of the few hours that I spent interviewing him.

Ya'akov Gabai, born in Athens, worked in the Sonderkommando together with his brother, who lives in the United States today. Their ability to support each other was undoubtedly one of the factors that helped them to survive.

The Gabais settled in Leghorn, Italy, in the sixteenth century. Their descendants still live there. Even the Gabais who lived in Greece, including Ya'akov, kept up their Italian citizenship. For some time, the Germans honored the Italian citizenship of Jews who held it and refrained from sending them to the camps. Thus, the Gabais were not sent to Auschwitz until 1944.

Ya'akov Gabai was an eternal optimist. Even while in Auschwitz, he was convinced that he would leave the camp alive. Ya'akov Gabai was a strong man. He stated as much in our conversations—strong enough to survive and tell posterity what he had seen.

Once I asked him if he was ashamed of the work he had performed in Birkenau. No, he replied. However, he could not conceal his anguish over the suffering of the Jewish people. "With my own eyes I saw millions of Jews murdered!"

His most important disclosure came at the end of one of our interviews: Auschwitz, he said, never appeared in his dreams. "I live in the here and now. . . . I came to Auschwitz hoping that I'd leave it alive. I stayed alive because I stayed optimistic." I will never know where he summoned the strength to banish the memories of Birkenau to the remotest corner of his psyche, to his subconscious. He may have obtained it from simple faith in God. "I'm not a religious man," he said, "but I've never denied the existence of God." God must have liked Gabai; after all, He protected this special man, who is no longer with us, from coming to harm.

Ya'akov Gabai did not hide the truth from his children. His daughter, Rosa Brami, who lives on Ya'akov's moshav with her family, told me that her father had told her what had happened to him, leaving nothing out. She learned about Auschwitz and its atrocities as a little girl.

Several months after the German edition of this book was published, a copy came into the possession of Dr. Anton Dick-Boldes, a Jewish-German stage director who lived in Berlin. Impressed by its contents and, especially, by the story of Ya'akov Gabai, he decided to rework the narrative for the stage and created a chamber drama for two actors. The title of the play, which premiered in Berlin in the winter of 1997, mirrored that of this chapter: *I'll Get Out of Here!* Max A. Haupt played the role of the historian-interviewer and Ulrich Radoy played the Sonderkommando survivor.

I attended one of the performances. As the lights in the theater dimmed and the stage lights came on, I wondered what Ya'akov Gabai, the Holocaust survivor, would have thought had he known that a play based on his testimony were being performed in the capital of Germany for a German audience. Be that as it may, the interview follows.

Ya'akov, where were you born? Where is your family from?

I was born in Athens on September 26, 1912. My mother was Greek; my father was of Italian extraction. When I was three, my family moved from Athens to Salonika. That's where I was raised.

Can you describe the origins of your family?

The origins of my family go back to the sixteenth century in Leghorn, Italy. They are easy to trace. We were three brothers—myself, the firstborn, followed by Dario,[1] a few years younger than me, and the youngest, Sami. Only Dario and I survived.

My father worked for thirty years at the printing house of the Nea Litia ("New Truth") publishing company. My school didn't charge tuition. My parents weren't well off, so that made their lives much easier.

After I finished sixth grade, I also went to work for the Nea Litia printshop. In 1929 I was given permanent employment, and I stayed there for twelve years, until October 1940.

The Germans entered Greece on April 6, 1941. It was Good Friday. Athens surrendered on Sunday, April 27, 1941.

When did you begin to notice a change in the attitude toward the Jews?

We began to notice the war slowly. First we heard that the Italians had invaded Albania. Things got worse later on, but for the time being our family was spared from the troubles because Father was an Italian citizen. Fortunately for us, we were members of that group of privileged civilians who held Italian and Spanish citizenship. At the very beginning the Germans rounded up all Jews who didn't hold foreign citizenship. Thanks to our Italian citizenship,[2] we weren't deported to the camp until later on.

Can you give examples of changes that the Jews in Salonika felt in their daily lives?

The tragedy of the Jews of Salonika began at the end of 1942. First the *kehilla* [community administration] was put under pressure. They demanded astronomical amounts of money from the community officials and drafted all Jews aged eighteen to forty-five for forced labor.[3]

The kehilla wasn't strong enough to resist. From July 1941 until the deportation to Auschwitz, the men had to do forced labor. At first, the Jews of Salonika were taken to camps in central Greece, where slave labor was done. They had to build roads, dig trenches, and lay rails, under conditions of starvation, severe abuse, and humiliation.[4]

At that time, I was working for the liberal newspaper *La Verdad* (The Truth) but they banned the paper right away and the flow of information about what was happening in Greece and elsewhere was almost totally cut off. The Germans put out a special newspaper for Jews, a paper in German using Greek characters. They called it *Nea Evropi* ["New Europe"]. It carried anti-Semitic writings that fanned the flames of confusion and terror.

When they began to round up the Jews of Salonika for deportation to the camp, my family decided to move to Athens. We hoped to find refuge there on the basis of our Italian citizenship. We left Salonika on July 15, 1943, two months before Mussolini fell. I was already married to Lora, the daughter of Yehoshua Menasse of Salonika. I had met her in 1935. There were almost no Jews left in Salonika,[5] and in Athens we hoped to start a new life.

Our life in Athens was uneventful. Every week the Italian army gave us

some food, including things that we couldn't usually get in Greece. It was a time of peace and quiet. Until Italy surrendered, the Germans didn't harm Italian and Spanish citizens. But on September 5, 1943, Mussolini gave up. As from the end of that month, we had to report to a German bureaucrat each month. On March 24, 1944, they gave the order to deport all Italian citizens from Athens.

We couldn't believe our ears. We thought they'd let us go. Instead, just then they began to deport the Jews of Athens to the camps. I was in the first transport. I received the deportation order in a surprising way. Every morning, we had to gather at the synagogue to sign an attendance form. One day, they arrested us there. I never showed up to sign personally; usually I sent someone else in my place. But that day of all days, I went there personally and they arrested me. Call it the hand of fate. We were taken to the Haidar camp, which was really a Greek prison, and we spent a week there. We didn't know what we were up against. We thought the Greeks might take some initiative to liberate us. After a week full of nightmares, on April 1, 1944, when I was thirty-two years old, we were loaded onto a train bound for Poland. We were told that we were going to Krakow.[6]

Our transport set out from Athens. From there it went through Arta and Ioannina. There were twenty-five hundred people aboard—men, women, and children. The trip took ten days, from April 1 to April 11, 1944. We crossed Greece, Yugoslavia, Hungary, and Austria, until we got to Poland.[7]

Were you and your family in the same car?

We were together in the train. My brothers and parents were with me. So was my wife.

What were you allowed to bring from home?

We brought blankets, one mattress, and two or three tunics.

There was no washroom in the railroad car. Food was rationed out stingily. We tried to spend most of the trip sleeping. During the eleven days, a few of us died. The doors were never opened except once, and only once, when we reached Budapest. There they opened the doors and gave us water. They also removed the dead people from the cars.

We left Athens at sunset and reached Auschwitz on April 11, 1944. It was a Tuesday, at ten in the morning.

What happened on April 11 after the train stopped?

We'd reached our destination. Near the station we saw a group of men and women pulling weeds. They looked rather worn out. Later that day they did the first *Selektion* on the platform: young women and young men were sent to one side and old people to the other side. All the elderly, the ill, the weak, the frail, pregnant women, and children were loaded onto trucks and sent to

Birkenau, where they were incinerated right away. That very day they were taken straight to their death.[8]

When the old people were driven away in the truck, we still thought that they were lucky. Look, they get to ride and we have to walk.[9]

What happened to the members of your family after you got off the train?

After the *Selektion* was over—my brother and I stayed together—a truck came to take our parents. We walked over to them and said, "Have a good trip, be well, feel good. We'll all survive." Of the whole family, only my brother made it. Unfortunately, all the others perished.

What else do you remember about the Selektion?

The Germans who did the *Selektion* told each of us which way to turn. I didn't imagine that it was the last time I'd see my family.

Had you heard the name "Auschwitz" before?

Back in 1942 we'd heard about labor camps in the Ukraine. When we reached Auschwitz, we thought we'd come to one of those camps. We didn't know that Auschwitz meant death. We were sure it was just another labor camp.

Seven hundred people in the transport were selected, including my brother and me, and we all had to walk three kilometers to Birkenau. We didn't know where they'd taken our families. For a month or less they kept us in the quarantine camp[10] in case we had some disease. In that case, they could kill us all in one go. Fortunately for us, no one got sick.

When did you get your prisoner number?

A few days later, I was given the number 182569. People in the camp didn't have names, just numbers.

Twenty days after we'd come—on May 12, 1944—there was another *Selektion,* a stricter one. Two doctors came with two officers. We had to stand in front of them naked. A German doctor examined us without saying a thing and selected the three hundred strongest and healthiest men. It was a thorough and comprehensive examination. The doctor spent five minutes circling around me and feeling me all over. Two *Kommandoführer*—squad commanders—who stood next to him told us, "From this day on you'll work hard but you won't lack for food and clothing." That calmed us down; we were pleased to hear it. We were 750 people in all—men who'd been in the camp for some time and prisoners who'd just come. They took us to a labor camp that had an extra marking, "Camp D."[11] With that, in fact, we joined the Sonderkommando.

On Friday we were taken to the Sonderkommando block, where we met some Polish Jews who'd been living in France. There were also a few Jews from Russia, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Jakob Kaminski[12] was appointed Kapo. He was an amazing man—a very tough guy who wasn't afraid of the Germans.

When we reached the camp after we'd been selected for the Sonderkommando, we had no further contact with the rest of the people in the camp. About 100 of us lived in the loft of Crematorium I [II], 100 in the loft of Crematorium II [III], and 750 at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V].[13] When we got to our barracks, the prisoners told us, "Everything here is better than at home. You just have to know one thing—none of us will get out of here alive." I was with a Jew from Russia who was a born pessimist. He said to me, "Ya'akov, we'll never get out of here, believe me. I know what I'm talking about." Those who'd already been there for a long time told us, "Working for the Sonderkommando means burning corpses every day." It was the first time we'd heard that they were incinerating people in Auschwitz.

At the beginning of the week, on Monday, May 15, our group was divided up. One group went to Crematorium II [III] and we were taken to Crematorium I [II]. Our group was made up mainly of Greek Jews, including Michel Arditti, Josef Baruch of Corfu,[14] the Cohen brothers, Shlomo and Maurice Venezia,[15] me and my brother Dario Gabai, Leon Cohen, Marcel Nadjari,[16] and Daniel Ben-Nachmias.[17] We were told that we wouldn't have to work on the first night, just watch. I remember that a transport from Hungary arrived a little before 5:30 P.M. The old-timers told us to study the people's faces carefully, since within a few moments they would no longer be among the living. We didn't believe it. A short time later, we were ordered to go downstairs to watch what was happening. We went down, opened the gas chamber, and indeed, we saw the bodies. We were told that this would be our job. Outside, there was a sign that said "Showers" in Polish, German, Russian, and English.

When the door of the gas chamber was opened in front of you for the first time, what did you see?

I saw bodies on top of each other. There were about twenty-five hundred bodies there. You could see wounds and blood on many of them. I'd never seen anything like it. It was a ghastly sight.

I recall that afterwards they led us to the room where they took the bodies—where they tore out the gold teeth, hacked off the women's hair, and gathered up the valuables. We had to watch how they did the work.

What thought went through your mind when you saw the bodies?

I thought it was a tragedy, a terrible tragedy that was happening to the Jewish people, being murdered here in such a cruel way.

For the first few days, it was just terrible. But I told myself, "You mustn't lose your sanity." I knew that from then on I'd have to see these sights day in, day out. This would be our job, so we'd better get used to it. A tough job, but you get used to it.

We didn't work the first night. We began to work only on the second night.

The supervisor came and told each of us what he'd be doing. "You do this, and you do that."

My job was with another prisoner. We were to pick up the bodies and lay them on a stretcher. I had to load the bodies straight into the furnace with a pitchfork.

Each furnace had three doors. Four bodies could be put in through each door—sixty bodies in fifteen minutes, and after fifteen minutes you had to stir the whole thing with the pitchfork. The fire blazed and after another fifteen minutes nothing remained of the victims except ashes. Then the work started over. Our work added up to only three minutes—four minutes at the most—and a half-hour break.

Did you know before you were assigned to the Sonderkommando that people were being murdered and cremated in Auschwitz?

The newspapers in Greece had been reporting on the Germans' actions in the camps since 1943, but we didn't believe it. Who'd believe that the Germans—a civilized people—could do such a thing? But Jews were being cremated every day, every single day, endlessly, and outside the band played and the women's choir sang songs. After we had worked for three days, an order was given that half of the new Sonderkommando, including me, would be sent to Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] because there were so many transports. They had to cremate 24,000 Hungarian Jews every day.

The Sonderkommando men who'd been stationed there weren't able to keep up with the work by themselves. Several days later, after several thousand Hungarian Jews were cremated in the bunkers, everyone went back to their regular places and continued to do their regular work in the Sonderkommando.

Starting in late April and throughout May, large numbers of transports from Hungary reached Birkenau. They were so large that the crematoria didn't have room for such masses of people. So they dug pits where they could cremate thousands more. My Sonderkommando group worked next to the "Sauna" building in the forest, across from Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V].[18] The pits where they cremated the leftover bodies from the crematorium were dug there. They called the pits "bunkers."[19] I worked there for three days.

They brought the bodies from the gas chamber to the bunker and that's where they cremated them. The bunker was surrounded by trees so no one could see what was going on there. The method of cremation in the bunkers was like this: they laid the bodies on a layer of logs, placed logs and boards on top of them, and more bodies on top of those, and so on, three layers or more. Afterwards an SS man came over, poured gasoline into the pit, and lit a match. Everything burst into flames. About a thousand corpses were cremated every

hour. The fat from the corpses kept the fire going.[20] They put down a kilogram of coal and two boards and started the fire. Then the fire spread to the peoples' bodies.

Then, at the end of the twelve-hour shift, we returned to Block 13 in Camp B. The next day, we went back to work in the bunkers. One of the members of our group had come with me in the same transport. His name was Menachem Litschi. He'd been a shoemaker in Greece. He left a wife and two daughters behind. One day he said to me, "Ya'akov, this work is intolerable. Look, we can't continue throwing people into the fire. I don't want to live anymore." I told him to be patient for a couple of days, "All beginnings are tough. Everything passes. Don't throw your life away." He waited two days, and on the third day—when he thought no one was looking—as they were bringing the bodies to the bunker, Menachem jumped into the fire with the body that he was dragging and cremated himself. A German sergeant named Grünberg shot him to spare him the pain. It happened on the May 18, 1944.

A month or two later, a German soldier came to Crematorium II [III] and asked, "Do any of you know about the incident with Menachem?" I raised my hand. He asked me to tell him what happened. I said, "I will, but not in German, only in French." He took me to the office. There they sat me down and gave me something to eat, and then someone came and asked me to tell them about the Menachem incident. I asked myself: if the Germans were executing thousands of people every day, why were they suddenly concerned about the fate of one man? I knew I mustn't tell them that he'd committed suicide. When they asked me how such a thing could happen, I said that he got too close to the fire as he carried the body and that he slipped and fell in. That's that. It would have gone very badly for me if I'd told them that it had been a suicide.

Why?

They would have killed me on the spot.

Were there additional cases that were similar to Menachem's?

No, that was the only case I remember.

After I did my job of dragging bodies, I usually spent most of my day sitting around the bunker, and in the evening I went back to Camp D. I wanted to live in the crematorium building. I didn't want to stay at the bunkers. That was where the work was hardest, endless. We worked without breaks; we didn't stop even for a minute. We had to walk, lift, drag, throw, walk, lift, drag, throw, with the German guards watching our every move.

Each evening, nine or ten members of our group brought our supper. Once or twice I seized the moment and asked the Kapos, Kaminski and Lemke,[21] "Why can't you have me moved from the bunkers to the crematorium?" Ka-

minski and Lemke did their best, and four days later I was moved to Crematorium II [III], where I stayed until I left the camp on January 18, 1945. I was fortunate to have left the pits so quickly, because the work there was endless.

Where did your brother Dario work all that time?

For a month he worked at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] and then Kaminski moved him to join me at Crematorium II [III], so we'd be together.

What was your brother's job?

We worked in the same building but they gave him a different job, an easier one, because he was weaker. When they took the bodies up the elevator to the furnace level, Dario took the bodies and brought them, always in batches of four, to a place in front of the doors of the ovens. His job was much easier than mine because he didn't have to pick up the bodies. He dragged them by the hands. Some jobs in the Sonderkommando were easier and others were harder, but we always helped each other.[22]

How did the work affect him?

Truth to tell, I didn't think he'd make it. He was a sensitive man, ten years younger than me. Just the same, he held on to the end.

How did Crematorium II [III] look from the outside?

You wouldn't believe it—it looked like a factory building. There was a smokestack at the front, like any factory would have. Except for the stench of scorched human flesh that rose from the smokestack, you'd never imagine that people were being murdered there.

Can you describe what happened when a transport arrived?

Whenever a train pulled in, a group of Germans waited on the platform to do the selection. The camp doctor was together with them. The trains stopped at the platform, not far from the crematorium building, and then the selection began. First they removed the children and the women. The Germans didn't beat the women and the children. Real gentlemen.[23]

The gate to the crematorium compound was about a hundred meters from where the trains stopped, so we could see how many people from each transport would be sent to the crematorium. The camp commander told the doctor, who took part in the selection, what percent of each transport he was interested in so they could be sent to forced labor: 10 percent today, 15 percent tomorrow, 20 percent the next day, and so on. There were also transports where 100 percent went to death without a selection. The selection was done without criteria of any kind. The German team that did it set the quota in accordance with the percentages that the camp commander determined. The people who were doomed to death were sent to whichever crematorium was available just then.

How did the Germans know which crematorium was available just then?

Each crematorium had an *Oberfeldwebel* (sergeant major) who announced each morning whether his crematorium did or didn't have room. The sergeant major of our crematorium was a lowly red-haired thug from Berlin. In May and June 1944, all the crematoria worked nonstop.[24] In July 1944, things calmed down a little and in August there were almost no more transports.

When did you have a chance to talk with the victims who came to the crematorium?

Before the work, when we had nothing to do, we sometimes went to the large undressing room to receive the victims who had gone there. Then we saw them, all of them.

Could you talk with them?

We had to persuade them to undress but we were not allowed to tell them the truth.

What did you think when you saw a transport with hundreds of Jews and you knew that they'd all be dead within a few moments?

I told myself that they couldn't be helped in any way whatsoever. The Germans held the power; they couldn't be opposed. After all, we didn't have weapons that we could do something with. None of the Jews in the undressing room ever asked me where they were about to go.

Do you remember anyone from those transports? Do you remember your impressions when you saw the people who'd came in those transports?

No, because we really didn't speak with them. I never spoke with them. When we were busy with another incoming transport, those coming were welcomed by members of the "Kanada" Kommando[25] together with German guards.

We never received them because it wasn't our job. Sometimes we didn't see the transports at all and didn't know who'd come in them because we were busy with our work at the time. We couldn't walk away from the job to observe the incoming transport.

Did the Sonderkommando workers ever encounter relatives?

It was always possible except for the transports of Hungarian Jews. Everyone who was in my situation—my wife was a prisoner in the camp—was afraid. I was always afraid that they'd send my wife to the crematorium and murder her, and I always asked myself what I would do in that case. Fortunately, it didn't happen, but on October 31, 1944, when the last four hundred *Muselmänner*[26] were led to their death, two of my cousins who used to work at Labor Camp D in Birkenau were among them. We sat and chatted for two hours in the undressing room of the crematorium.

So you knew that your cousins were going to die.

Yes, of course. We knew who'd been slated for death from the orders the

Germans gave. When the prisoner had to undress and he was offered a blanket, some bread, and a little margarine, it meant that he was going to be thrown into the crematorium.

What did you talk about?

I asked them how it could be that people like them, who'd always been so brave and cool, would find themselves in such a situation. They answered, "This is our lot in life, our fate, we can't dodge it."

They ate and we smoked cigarettes until it was time for them to go. One of the Germans said, "Now it's time to finish you off." Then I told them, "Come, I've got something terrible to tell you, but you won't suffer." I led them to the gas chamber, to the very place where the gas was put in. "If you sit here, you won't suffer even for a second." When I left, the German soldier told me, "More power to you; you've got lots and lots of courage!" I answered, "Why should they suffer so much?" Ten of the victims who were put to death that day were acquaintances and family members from Greece.

By the time we'd finished cremating the 390 bodies, each and every one of us had cremated a few of our relatives and acquaintances separately. We gathered up the ashes of each person separately and buried it in cans. We recorded the name of the victim, his date of birth, and the date of his murder. We buried the cans and we even said Kaddish over them. Now, who'll say Kaddish for us? we asked ourselves . . . When the Russians came,[27] I heard that they'd found the cans.[28]

Please describe a few transports that remain etched in your memory.

On my first day of work with the Sonderkommando, in the afternoon, a transport from Hungary came.

I have strong memories of a transport that came from Greece in June 1944, with two thousand people. It was the last transport from Greece and all the Jews were sent to their death without a *Selektion*. It was done by order of the camp commander. Everyone in this transport went up in flames, without exception.

In late June 1944, prisoners from the Gypsy camp were brought over. They resisted because they didn't want to go to the crematorium. They were all still healthy.

One day in the middle of July 1944, at three o'clock in the morning, a transport with at least fifteen hundred people came in. They were Jews from Hungary—men, women, and infants. We waited for them in the undressing room. First came the women, girls, and children. Suddenly we saw a woman with two children who asked us, "How can I get undressed in front of you? It's a disgrace!"[29] We told her that we were used to it, and before we continued the camp commander appeared and said to the woman, "Put your clothes here,

and the children's clothes too, and remember the number on the hanger so you'll find your clothing again." How ironic . . . She went straight to the gas with her children, and that was that.

In August 1944, fewer and fewer transports from Hungary came. When the transports from Hungary were over, there was nowhere left to send Jews from. Smaller transports came later on, but then the flow just about stopped. Slowly the Germans began to retreat from places where Jews could be sent from.

A large transport from Lodz came in August 1944[30] and that month 250 Polish *Muselmänner* were sent from several camps on the outskirts of Auschwitz. By that time, they were unable to move. Right then the commander of the crematorium, Moll of the SS, came and said, "Don't send these ones to the gas." He wanted to butcher them personally. First he beat them with the metal rod that he used to shatter the remaining bones of people who had died. Afterwards, he came down and asked one of the soldiers to give him a rifle and some bullets. He began to shoot. After he shot four or five of them, one of the *Muselmänner* called out, "Commander!" and Moll, who was a brutal sadist, answered, "Yes?"

"I've got a request."

"What do you want?"

"As you shoot my friends, I want to sing the Blue Danube waltz."

"Be my guest! How jolly! It's even better to shoot with musical accompaniment," Moll answered. So the man sang—la-la-la—and Moll shot them all until it was the singer's turn. The last bullet hit him and finished him off.

I also remember that forty-two children were brought over, able-bodied kids who were thirteen or fourteen years old. Among them I saw a boy who didn't die even after being shot five times. They slaughtered them all that way.[31]

About two weeks later, twenty partisans arrived including four beautiful women. They knew they were being taken to their death. We expected them to defend themselves and throw their fists around, since after all, they were partisans, but nothing happened. They went like the proverbial lambs to the slaughter. We told them to undress and none of them made a peep. They all walked silently to the gas chamber—like lambs to the slaughter.

I remember a case when 140 to 150 adolescent girls reached us. They sat down and began to clown around and laugh. They must have thought they'd come to Birkenau for a good time. We were pretty amazed—What's going on here? Half an hour, two hours went by, and they weren't cremated yet? Then an order came to send them back. A truck drove them to the Sauna, to some room. When they came out of the crematorium healthy and kicking, we told them, "Light a candle for [your good fortune in] coming out of this place

alive." As they sat there, they were ordered to write postcards: "We've reached the camp. The Germans gave us a warm welcome. We are being well fed and are healthy." Two days later, they took them back to the crematorium and they put up a tremendous fuss, since they knew what was awaiting them. They were wiped out.

Once they brought a girl from Hungary who had a two-day-old baby. She knew she was about to be murdered. We had nothing to do that night. We sat around idly and offered her a chair to sit down, some food, and cigarettes. She told us that she was a singer and talked for about half an hour. We sat in front of the furnaces. Next to us sat a Dutch SS man,[32] a rather nice, likable guy. He also listened in. When the story was over, he stood up and said, "Very well, we can't sit here like this forever; now it's death's turn." She was asked what she preferred, that we kill the baby first or her. She said, "Me first. I don't want to see my child dead." Then the Dutchman stood up, brought over the rifle, shot her, and threw her into the furnace. Then he picked up the baby, bang-bang, and that was that.

We're the only ones who saw the tragedy of the Jews with our own eyes. That Dutch SS man spent a year and a half in the camp and saw everything, but he didn't grasp the tragedy of the people, the Jewish people. We saw and experienced everything. The work was very hard at first, but as time passed we got used to it.

In the undressing room I once ran into a mother and her daughter. The woman pulled off a platinum ring and handed it to me. She apparently thought I could save her daughter. But I didn't have the authority to do that. I took the ring. But how long could you hold onto something like that? Eventually I threw it away.

Ya'akov, how can you remember all the details, including exact dates? That's amazing!

I kept a diary. I began it on my first day with the Sonderkommando and kept it until January 18, 1945, when I was liberated. I kept records every day. Almost five hundred pages. Everyday I wrote down the most ordinary events, like "Today such and such happened . . ." or "Today we did such and such work . . ." Every day I wrote down what I did in the Sonderkommando. There was something new every day—strange ways of dying, places where the transports came from, the people's behavior, the teenagers who cried out, "We don't want to die, we can work, send us to work." But by then, who listened to them? The world ignored the Jews' fate, didn't it? They were all slaughtered.

Did anyone know that you were keeping a diary?

A few people. A few of my friends knew, but it had to be kept secret.

Why did you keep the diary?

I told myself that I might get out of there. But I couldn't take the diary along when we left Birkenau. How could I take those five hundred pages from Birkenau to Mauthausen? What would the Germans say? They'd murder me.[33]

Where did you leave your diary?

There, without burying it. But even though the diary was lost, I remember lots and lots of dates and I'll never forget them. I have a good memory for exact dates; they never slip my mind.

Can you list those dates?

First day of work in the Sonderkommando—May 15, 1944. Two hundred friends who were led to us by German soldiers and murdered—September 18, 1944. Sonderkommando uprising—October 7, 1944. Last day in Birkenau—January 18, 1945.

What can you recount about the undressing room?

The victims who came in the transports entered the undressing room from the rear and met people from previous transports. They had to go down twenty steps. Girls and little children undressed first.[34] Carefully and courteously, the Germans led them from the steps to a large room—the undressing room. The room had hangers with numbers and hooks, where they had to hang their clothes. Next, the victims moved on to a corridor. They took a left turn, and there was the door of the gas chamber. But when it was the men's turn, the Germans made them move faster and treated them roughly and aggressively: "Move it, move it, move it!" They flogged them into the gas chamber and closed the door behind them.

The message "Shower Room" was written on a large sign across from the door, in German, Russian, and Yiddish. They went in there.

How many people went into the gas chamber at one time?

About two thousand people.

Were all two thousand people together in the undressing room—men, women, and children?

Yes, yes. The women went into the undressing room first; the men followed them. The men didn't see how the women undressed but in the gas chamber they were all together. Then the SS men closed the door on them.

Can you describe the door?

The door was a thick slab less than two meters high. You could close it hermetically from the outside.

How was the gas thrown into the gas chambers?

There were four openings in the ceiling of each gas chamber. In front of all the fixed openings were glass windows protected with iron bars. When the order "Throw it in!" was given, a German would go upstairs and throw the Zyklon B gas down through one of the openings. In the ceiling of the gas

chambers there were shower heads—obviously not connected to the water supply—and pipes that were set within a metal grille.

Who exactly opened the pipes and threw in the gas?

An SS man. When he threw the gas down, a blue vapor spread through the chamber. The gas came in the form of blue cubes and when they came into contact with the air, the gas was released, causing instant asphyxiation.

Didn't the people start screaming?

They did scream, but who could hear them? The gas had already been thrown in from above. They were all dead within a few minutes.

After that, a doctor came over and looked through a peephole in the door to watch the people in their death throes and make sure that everyone was dead or whether anyone was still alive. He glanced at his watch, looked through the peephole, and watched as death overcame them. He was the one who announced that the chambers could be opened because it was all over. "The business is done," he'd announce in German and go on his way. Then a German guard went upstairs and opened the windows. First they opened the vents in the ceiling and then, ten minutes later, they opened the door. After half an hour, it was possible to start work. For half an hour you couldn't go near the gas chamber.

What was the scene that met your eyes after the gassings when the door to the gas chamber was opened?

Bodies piled on top of one another—two thousand bodies.

Did you see this with your own eyes?

Yes. After all, I was there for ten months.

Fifteen or twenty men worked downstairs, pulling out the bodies with straps or poles. They attempted to separate the bodies as they gathered them up. A few Russians worked with us. They threw the bodies out into a small passage. In the passage opposite there was an elevator that had room for ten corpses. You pushed a button to send them upstairs, to the furnaces.

What did the bodies look like after they had been gassed?

The corpses that were removed from the gas chamber were smeared all over with urine and blood. The *Muselmänner* were in the worst state of all.

Where was the blood from?

From internal hemorrhages that burst in the gas chambers. The gas made blood vessels break open. Some of the Sonderkommando people cleaned up the chamber after the bodies were removed. About twenty men worked upstairs, at the furnaces. At first there were four workers who sorted the bodies for each of the four doors of the furnaces. The crematorium had hoses and spigots. First, the bodies were taken out of the gas chamber and we took the hose—we wore boots for this—and began washing the bodies with a strong

jet of water. We had to get rid of the bloodstains. After they'd been washed, the wet bodies went into the furnaces. According to a rule made by the Germans, we washed them so that they'd go into the furnace clean. Washing them also made it easier for us to drag the bodies over the floor.

How were the furnaces fueled?

Behind the building was a pile of boards that were used to start the fire. Afterwards, the human fat fueled the flames.

How long did it take to burn the bodies?

Half an hour. Within half an hour, four bodies were burned in each of the openings of the furnaces. The cremation process worked like this: there were five furnaces, each with three doors—two in the front and one at the back. Five furnaces multiplied by three doors, multiplied by four bodies in each—and you can cremate 60 corpses in Crematorium II [III] in half an hour at one go . . . 120 per hour . . . 2,880 in a day, working round the clock. So it took a full day to work on one transport. Now you can figure the capacity of all four crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

For the first fifteen minutes, we rushed around with a pitchfork and turned over the body to get it near the flames. Exactly a quarter of an hour after it was thrown in, it was totally consumed and the next foursome was shoved in. The maximum capacity was four adult bodies or six to eight children.

Was there a division of labor among the prisoners?

The labor was divided like this: at first, four men worked upstairs at the furnaces. After the elevator reached the upper floor, they opened the door and four men pulled out the corpses, sorted them into groups of four, and placed the foursomes at the furnace door. We were divided into two groups with five men in each. The first group carried the stretchers forward to the furnace doors. The second group stood on either side of the stretcher and held the bodies with a pole. There were wheels on the front end of the stretcher.

The job they made me do wasn't so hard. I had to lift up the bodies and place them on the stretcher—head-to-toe with one another—and throw them into the furnace. I had a pitchfork. The stretcher bearers lifted it up and I shoved the bodies in, two at a time, using two pitchforks, one on the right side, one on the left.

Within three minutes, all sixty corpses were in the furnaces. Fifteen minutes later, I had to stir the flesh of the bodies with a pitchfork. The smoke reached a height of about seventeen meters. The Germans were afraid of the Russian or American planes that sometimes flew over the camp. After another fifteen minutes, we opened the doors, removed the ashes, and dumped them on the other side. We worked for three minutes and then waited half an hour until the bodies were entirely cremated. During that time we rested, washed our hands,

had a swig of vodka, and sat around. When we worked at night, we could even take a nap during the half-hour. Sometimes, when the furnaces were not operating, we cleaned them, removing all kinds of dirt. We didn't clean the furnaces themselves, just the space in front of them.

How were the bodies placed in the furnace?

We took two or three women and put one man between them, because women's bodies have more fat. There was a door at the edge of the furnace and we threw children into the bottom of it. We cremated seven or eight children each time. It was an enormous factory.

Did you look the corpses in the face as you threw them into the furnace?

I never looked when the transports had arrived from the ghettos, but transports sometimes came from other camps, and then I looked very closely, because I was concerned for my wife. After all, I might find her among the new arrivals.

Where did they rip the gold teeth out of the bodies?

In the place where we washed them and sorted them into groups of four. They pulled out the teeth before they put the bodies into the furnaces. As we washed the bodies, there were two guys from Czechoslovakia there: the "dentists," they were the ones who pulled out the gold teeth. They really were dentists, these guys from Czechoslovakia; they also treated the Germans' teeth. There was a big box there; that's where they threw the gold in: a square crate with the word "Germany" written on it. That's where they threw the gold teeth, all the gold. Every week one or two Germans came, a major or lieutenant colonel. Officers. They opened the box and helped themselves to whatever they pleased, at random.[35] About a month later, the crate was sent to Germany. They also sent the clothes to Germany. The Hungarians brought nice clothes with them, suitcases full of all sorts of goodies. They left the food for us.

Forgive the question: How much ash do you get from one human body?

It weighs less than a kilogram. The pelvic bones wouldn't be totally cremated, so we had to take them out of the furnace with an ax and grind them up with this metal instrument,[36] until they crumbled to ashes, too. There were various instruments there. Since we turned the bodies over after fifteen minutes, not much remained of them.

Where did you take the ashes of the cremated bodies?

When the corpses were cremated in the furnace, the ashes came out of the other side of the furnace. Then we took a cart, filled it up, and took the ashes to the crematorium yard. When there was a pile of ashes as big as a hill, a truck came, loaded the ashes, and dumped them into the river.[37] "Fish food," the Germans said sarcastically.

How many people worked with you at cremating the bodies?

There were four other men, always the same group, no turnover.

Were the other members of the group also from Greece?

No, they were from Poland.

How did you communicate?

We spoke a little Yiddish and mainly we used sign language. We got along. After all, I'd taken two years of German and two years of English in an Italian school.

Were you together with the same Sonderkommando men the whole time?

We stayed together until the last day, until we left Auschwitz. Then we went our separate ways and never saw each other again.

Were your lives in Birkenau different from the lives of other prisoners?

Life with the Sonderkommando was nothing like the lives of the other prisoners in the camp. We were far away from the camp, separated, and we had no contact whatsoever with the rest of the camp inmates.

About a hundred Sonderkommando prisoners were divided into two groups—at least fifty for the night shift and fifty for the day shift. We did this work for twelve hours a day. There were weeks when you were on the six P.M. to six A.M. shift, and the next week the shifts were turned around so you worked from six A.M. to six P.M. We preferred to work at night since it was harder in the morning; the officers always came around then. Also, the discipline was more relaxed at night because the guards were asleep.

Forgive me for putting this way: Am I right in saying that you had a sort of "black market" going, including trade with the Germans?

Not among us; it wasn't necessary because we had everything. We had lots of cash and gold that we'd found in the undressing room. Most of it had been stuffed into the clothes of the murdered people. We handed it to the Germans and they gave us sausage and drinks for dinner. Without the drinks it wouldn't have worked. We and the Germans engaged in lively barter, as you'd do at an ordinary fair.

What was your daily routine like?

We woke up at five A.M. At six o'clock there was a roll call of the whole Sonderkommando at Crematorium II [III]—those who worked at night and those who were about to start the morning shift. Everyone had to report for roll call before the German major. If one of us was ill, our Kapo announced: "One man is missing; he's is ill," and the German wrote it down. Then the work began. Between eight and nine we had a thirty-minute break for food. Then we carried on as normal. We had a normal midday meal and then worked until six in the evening.

What about the meals, the food . . . ?

Sometimes when we hadn't eaten all the food they'd served us, we took it to the slave laborers, who did very hard outdoor work. As for the food, we didn't want for a thing. We could take anything we found in the victims' belongings. We had bread, cake, sausage, everything. We had leftovers of everything and the German guards stayed and joined us for eating. Every day we received a portion of beef—the best chunk there was. We made soup from the best bones. And in the morning, we sometimes brought the sentry at the guard post a little of the soup. He was really happy. We had plenty of food, so much that we could bring our food and bread to the camp. We took food from the transport even when Germans were in the undressing room. They didn't stop us.[38]

There was a glut of everything, of food and of various kinds of food. We didn't know what to take first from the huge supply. Each sandwich was better than the one before. The supply was replenished everyday. There was even plenty of meat.[39]

Did you drink liquor?

Yes, we all drank liquor, too. We had everything, everything we wanted—96-proof vodka. We had permission to drink alcoholic beverages, anything we wanted.

Where did you live?

In the crematorium building, Crematorium II [III]. We lived there, on the top floor, in private rooms. I slept in a bed with a blanket and a pillow.[40]

Was it possible to sleep well so close to the furnaces?

They weren't far away. They burned the corpses down below and our rooms were upstairs in the loft. They were furnished with good beds, blankets, and pillows. We had everything. Life upstairs went on no matter what was happening down there.

What did you wear to work in the Sonderkommando?

We had warm clothes, some of the best. We had trousers and tunics with linings, warm underwear, jackets, hats, and coats. Later on, when we were taken from Auschwitz to Mauthausen, those clothes helped us. People died along the way and we stayed healthy and unscathed.

Did you ever go out to the lawn outside the crematorium?

Yes. It was a very well-kept lawn. Sometimes when we had nothing to do, we did some weeding or cleaned up the area. When we didn't have work—that is, when there were no transports—we also cleaned the crematorium now and then. At other times when transports didn't come, they gave us shovels and sent us into the yard, to make it tidy, to clean it up. There was always something to do. We never sat around doing nothing.

What did you do in the evening in your rooms?

In the evening, we sang together. Somebody played; no one could say a thing because we were a long way from the camp. Every evening we ate, drank, and sang a lot. When there was no work and everything was quiet, we slept. We went to sleep at ten or eleven at night.

What about Sundays? Did you also work on Sundays?

Of course we worked on Sundays. We always worked if there was work. There were no days of rest. Every Sunday, we went to the bathhouse, the Sauna, and sang Greek folk songs on the way. The Germans also enjoyed our singing. Really, we could take showers every day at the crematorium showers, but going to the Sauna was something special.

Were you sometimes given a "vacation" from the work?

I remember that Yom Kippur fell on October 4, 1944. On the Monday evening I saw the Polish Jews in the Sonderkommando getting everything ready: Torah scrolls, prayer books, etc. The Germans gave us a day off and we prayed. Everyone prayed and did what they had to, and the next day, Tuesday, at five in the morning—on Yom Kippur—they received a transport of twenty-five hundred Jews. That was that! That was their Yom Kippur present. I still remember it well, and I told my friends, "Look what a present these bastards are giving us." Three days later, the uprising in Crematorium III [IV] broke out.

Did you hear or know about what was happening elsewhere in the camp?

My wife was in the women's camp and I visited her twice. Once every two weeks they gave us a chance to meet. I saw her only twice, and then, in October, she left the camp and went to Bergen-Belsen.

How did you find out where she was? How did you make contact with her?

Sometimes they let us out on Sunday afternoons when there wasn't a lot of work. The distance from Crematorium II [III], where I worked, to Crematorium I [II] was about a hundred meters. The railroad track ran between them; then you came straight away to Crematorium I [II]. We were allowed to visit each other and to walk from Crematorium I [II] to Crematorium II [III]. So we walked to Crematorium I [II], and across from there was Block 15, in the women's camp.

I loved to sing Greek or Italian songs, all kinds of songs. Once while I was singing an Italian song I suddenly heard my wife's voice. She was telling her friend, "That's Ya'akov, that's Ya'akov." I shouted out, "Yes, it's me. Where are you?" "In Block 15," she shouted back. "Good, I'm coming to visit you," I yelled. We shouted at each other that way, in Greek, "How can you visit me?" "Don't worry, I'll manage it."

Once every two weeks they took the blankets of the Sonderkommando men to the women's camp for disinfection. A group of ten men brought the blan-

kets to the women's camp each time. So one day I had the opportunity to go there. I had been told that I'd go to the disinfection place the next day. Before the day was over, I shouted to my wife, "Tomorrow I'm coming to visit you. Tell your supervisor not to send you to work. I'll bring you something, too." That's exactly what happened. The next morning, I "organized" two packets of cigarettes, some bread, and a few sweets and brought them to the supervisor and to my wife. That way we were able to be together for fifteen minutes. I saw that she was in good condition. I was happy that she wasn't skinny; it meant that she wasn't being starved. I managed to see her one more time in October 1944. Later in October, all the women were sent to Bergen-Belsen. On the day the uprising broke out, October 7, she was still there and she thought I'd been killed. After all, all the Sonderkommando men from Crematorium I [II] had been executed and hardly anyone in the Sonderkommando from Crematorium III [IV] survived. Very few of them survived.

Did your wife know what you were doing in the camp?

Yes, she knew.

When you made those biweekly visits to your wife, were you able to see the condition of the other Jewish prisoners, who weren't receiving enough food?

Yes, and we used our food rations for that purpose. We left the hundred portions that we'd been sent from the general mess and handed them over to the Jewish prisoners as extra food so they'd have the strength to work. We didn't touch them.

Were you able to smuggle food to your wife when you visited her?

Yes, I brought bread for her and cigarettes for her supervisor, so she wouldn't send my wife to work on the day of my visit.

Did people who came in the transports give you information about what was happening outside the camp?

We received information. We knew some of what was happening. But sometimes there wasn't enough time to speak to them.

Did you believe the information you received?

Yes. Generally speaking, we knew what was happening. Our lieutenant colonel, Fuchs, gave us a farewell speech: "I'm leaving you tomorrow. I'll be fighting for the fatherland. I wish you well." He was a degenerate, a contemptible person.

Were you able to pray there, as Jews?

Only on Yom Kippur. As I mentioned, Yom Kippur in 1944 fell on Tuesday, October 4.

Were you one of those who prayed that Yom Kippur in Auschwitz?

No, I didn't pray back then; I never visited a synagogue. Only here, in Israel, do I go to synagogue. I believe in God but I am not religious.

How many people who were in your transport worked in the Sonderkommando of Crematorium II [III]?

About fifty men. The others were long-term workers, and together there were a hundred of us. When we "newcomers" arrived, the veterans told us, "There's food and clothing here, everything, but you have to know one thing: none of you will come out of here alive." We heard them but we did not take in what they said. We were in shock.

From what countries did the Sonderkommando prisoners come during your tenure?

From Greece, Poland, France, and Russia. There were also a few from Hungary and one from Czechoslovakia at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]. Apart from me, the brothers Leon and Baruch Venezia, both of them from Salonika, worked in Crematorium II. They'd been arrested in Athens. Baruch Venezia had Italian citizenship. He was a tailor and a clothing merchant. His son worked with the Sonderkommando in Crematoria III-IV [IV-V] and was killed on Saturday, October 7, 1944, at ten o'clock in the morning, during the Sonderkommando uprising. There were some Polish Jews who had emigrated to France with me in the crematorium. They spoke French and had been arrested by the Germans in France.

What sorts of activities did you do together? What kinds of relations did you have?

Relations were friendly. We were good friends, loyal to each other. There was no choice in that hellhole.

What did you do after working hours?

We had close friendships.

Are any of your former co-workers in Crematorium II [III] living in Israel today?

Yes, Shmuel Lemke of Giv'at ha-Shelosha, but he doesn't want to talk about it.[41] Fifteen years ago, I had a friend in Kefar Sava who'd also been in Auschwitz. One Saturday he told me that he had a surprise for me. We drove to Giv'at ha-Shelosha and stopped at Lemke's house, and I said, "That's Lemke." We approached him, but he didn't recognize me. I jogged his memory and he remembered me. He began to cry and begged me not to tell his wife that he'd worked in the Sonderkommando.

Did you form some kind of relationship with any of the German overseers, the ones whom you knew well and with whom you spoke?

We interacted with our guards all the time. They were with us all the time and they were really OK. We had no problems at all with them. One of the guards was from Holland, a good guy, really fine. We always asked ourselves how this Dutchman could possibly be an SS man. There was another SS man,

an older one, who was also a good guy. One day he disappeared and none of us ever saw him again. Who knows what happened to him? He was replaced and didn't return. Apart from Otto Moll, there was another supervisor at the crematorium: the SS man Fuchs. One evening he called us over and gave us a lengthy speech. Look, he said, I'm leaving Birkenau to fight for my fatherland.

You could say that the guards treated us tolerably. They knew they weren't allowed to flog the Sonderkommando workers because we wouldn't be alive much longer.

Do you remember Otto Moll?

Yes, he was in charge of the Sonderkommando, half-crazy, a sadist. When Moll visited the crematorium, it meant that something special or something terrible had happened. Moll rode a motorcycle and on top of his uniform he wore a sanitary gown, a doctor's coat. He and his wife and two children lived in a villa a few kilometers from Birkenau. There were two Hungarians, a father and a son working with us at the crematorium. Once the son passed near the barbed-wire fence and Moll pulled out his handgun, shot him, and wounded him.

Why?

For the hell of it. He was half-crazy. A real sadist. Once 200 or 250 Polish Jews were brought in, more dead than alive. Moll brought them to the Sonderkommando so that they'd help us. But they no longer had the strength to walk. To go down to the gas chamber, you had to go down some stairs. One of the tools that we used was a metal bone crusher. When they went down the stairs, Moll threw this metal thing at their heads and killed two or three of them. Then he went downstairs as well and ordered the head of the detail to shoot each and every one of them with a rifle—all 250 prisoners. Finally, Moll murdered them with his own hands. One, two, three, ten, twenty . . . yes, that's how Moll murdered all 250 prisoners. By himself, with a rifle.

One of the Greeks, Jacques Benbenisti, was a painter. Moll took him to his house to paint a few pictures. He shot him as soon as he brought him back.

Here's another story about Moll. One Tuesday, as I was working at the bunker next to Crematorium III [IV], we took the bodies out of the gas chamber. A few of the Greeks were there. A body slipped out of the hands of one of them and fell to the floor. Moll, who happened to be there just then, pulled out his handgun and shot the Greek. He wasn't human. For him, murder was a children's game—he came, pulled out his gun, and fired. It didn't matter at whom. That was Moll. The worst of them all.

I heard that after he left Auschwitz, Moll was taken to another camp, to Kaulitz, where he asked the commander of the camp, "Why are you keeping these people around as prisoners? Come on, let's shoot them and be done with

it." The commander replied, "You murder your people in your camp. Here, where I'm in charge, I won't harm anyone."

He was captured by the Russians. The prisoners ripped him to shreds. But what difference did that make? He already had hundreds of dead people on his conscience. That was Moll.

How were your relations with the Kapos?

In the rest of the camp, the Kapo was the worst thing of all. Anything imaginable—endless beatings. Eighty percent of the Kapos were goyim, not Jews. But the Kapo at the crematorium was usually a Jew. The head Kapo, the *Oberkapo*, was Ya'akov Kaminski. He was in charge of dividing up the work, a real pro. The Germans always trusted him and said, "Whatever Ya'akov says is OK."

One day at 5:30 in the afternoon, as we stood for roll call, this wretch of a lieutenant colonel who was there told us, "Now we're going to do some exercises." Kaminski was brave. He sat down in the middle and said, "Herr Lieutenant Colonel, why? If the men have done something wrong, they deserve punishment. I'm the one in charge, I'm willing to accept the punishment now." The German got angry and shouted, "You do the exercises!" They finished off Ya'akov Kaminski that night.

Afterwards, a German named Karol was named Kapo. On the day of the uprising, they took him to the crematorium and burned him alive. The Germans looked for him. "Where's Karol? Where's he hiding?"

Do you remember various people who held the post of Kapo?

Yes. The Kapo who was in charge of us was a true friend. But the Kapo at the camp didn't look out for anyone but himself. He beat and abused everyone. There were two or three good Kapos, German Communists, but as for the rest of the Kapos, one was worse than the other. One Kapo in the quarantine camp—his name was Paulus, if I'm not mistaken—was a real bastard. I told him then that if I ever got my hands on him, I'd butcher him alive.

Do you remember any good German Kapos?

Yes, there were German Kapos who really protected their "workers." There were Kapos from Austria in the women's camp; they helped the women cut down trees. The SS man from the Netherlands, whom I told you about before, was still a boy—twenty-two, twenty-three at the most. He laughed and was a good guy; he didn't hurt a soul. He never said a bad word to anyone. A friend, a buddy. He even gave me his weapon and said, "Take it. You may play with it." The Ukrainians were very bad. You were in big trouble if you fell into the clutches of a Ukrainian. They were worse than the German SS men. Nobody terrified us more than them.

At night they let us sing. We had a mandolin and a guitar. We sang along with the Germans. We ate and drank together.

At those moments, when you were eating and drinking with the Germans, did you get close to each other? What did you talk about with the Germans?

We didn't have deep political discussions. We told jokes, talked about the songs. They loved to sing. It must sound terrible and it's hard to understand how we lived together with our murderers. But anything was possible in Auschwitz.

Do you remember Eichmann's visit?

He came in July 1944. I still remember it as if it were yesterday. At 6:15 in the morning. We already had four bodies inside, half-cremated, not yet totally cremated. Then a German guard came over and suddenly I saw Eichmann coming down with two other officers. That son of a bitch, that piece of carrion. He said, "You have to put two more on top, over the four—I don't care how." You had to be an expert do to that. It wasn't so simple to burn six bodies there. "Good, good . . ." he said, as we obeyed the order. He passed me twice, real close, just behind me, and stayed for a long time. He came to Birkenau twice.

What did you feel during the Eichmann trial?

I didn't go. What for? I'll tell you: there were people who were much more important than me; they saw him and saw what he'd done. If Moll had survived and they'd brought him to trial, then I would have gone to pay him back, to say it all to his face.

How long did you work in the Sonderkommando?

From May 15, 1944, to January 18, 1945—eight months in all.

How could you work for so long in that hell?

It's true that people who worked in the camp looked death in the eye every day, they were beaten, they had other tragedies. But we saw the most terrible things of all. We did the dirty work of the Holocaust. For eight months I worked with the Sonderkommando, eight whole months in the midst of this tragedy. It was grueling labor, especially for the first few days. Everyone was afraid that they'd find relatives among the corpses. The first time was the hardest. But really, believe me, you get used to everything. When we worked at night, as we did sometimes, I sat next to a dead person's body at midnight or so and it didn't tweak my emotions at all. I worked for three minutes and rested for half an hour. I knew they'd wipe me out if I made one false move. So I did my work, and truth to tell, throughout my time at the camp no German laid a hand on me. Only troublemakers copped it. They were the ones who got wiped out.

Did you have time to reflect about what you were seeing?

At first it was very painful to see all this. I couldn't grasp what my eyes were seeing—that all that was left of a human being was half a kilogram of ashes. Sometimes we reflected about it, but what good would it do us? Did we have any choice at all? Escape was out of the question, since unfortunately we didn't know the language.[42] I worked even though I knew that my parents had been exterminated. There's nothing worse than that. After two or three weeks, I got used to it. Sometimes as we rested at night, I'd put my hand on a body and it wouldn't bother me anymore. We worked like robots there. I had to stay strong in order to survive and relate everything that had happened in this hell. Reality proves that people are crueler than animals. Yeah, we were animals. We didn't have emotions. Sometimes we doubted whether we were still human.

It's hard for me to understand how you could sing after a day of work in the gas chamber, at the furnace.

Look, as I already said, we weren't just robots there; we'd become animals. We didn't think about a thing. We thought about only one thing—escape and survival.

Did you continue to believe in God during that time?

I'm not religious but I've always believed in God. I still do. I've never abandoned God.

You must have been smitten with utter despair, hopelessness.

I never despaired. When I got there, everyone said, "We're all going to die; we'll never get out of here." I just said, "I want to live!" I said it from the beginning. I was an optimist. I went in that way, I remained that way throughout my work in the Sonderkommando, and I went out that way. I knew I would survive.

Were you afraid?

No. Believe me, I wasn't afraid. I was never afraid of a thing. I didn't reflect about fear or about death. I was so optimistic. All the time I told myself, "I'm going to get out of here, I'm going to get out of all this." Everyone asked me, "How can you think of leaving?? Can't you see what's going on here?"

One of my friends was always pessimistic. He wailed all the time, and I said, "Stop wailing. A man doesn't cry." That's life—you have to grasp life on its good side. You mustn't be afraid. Life sometimes leads to things that aren't so good. I was never afraid of the Germans or anyone else. I've always held my head up high and looked straight ahead. That's how I was then and that's how I still am.

In June or July 1944, they began to talk about an uprising and began to consider how to escape from the camp. There was a Jewish officer from Russia there, a major, and a Jewish captain from Greece named Joseph Baruch. He

died shortly before the liberation. They talked with each other and put together an action plan of some kind.

In September 1944, the Germans announced, "There isn't enough work. We're transferring two hundred Sonderkommando prisoners from the crematoria to somewhere else." They took out all two hundred of the veteran workers and shot them three or four kilometers outside of Auschwitz. We didn't know a thing about it. At that time, we still had enough work at our crematorium. The order was given all of a sudden, just before seven P.M.: "Everyone upstairs—all two hundred prisoners—up to the living quarters." When we asked why, we were told, "Some Russian pilots have killed German soldiers. You are excused from having to cremate the bodies. We'll do it." We thought that was strange and we said to ourselves, "A soldier who dies in battle is entitled to a military burial, with a cross and his name on the grave. You don't cremate him." But an order is an order, so we went upstairs at seven o'clock and stayed there until eleven. While we were up there, they cremated about 200 to 250 bodies. Even before that, at about seven o'clock we heard from a distance, near the railroad track, trucks coming one after another. We saw their lights on. Two German soldiers stood at our gate, and suddenly we heard an order in German.

We didn't know what was happening. The trucks drove to the crematorium yard. We looked down to see what was happening and everything was dark. We couldn't make out what was going on. Just before eleven, they let us come down. The Germans had gone away; the only ones who remained were two guards—two for the day shift and two for the night shift. We opened the door and saw the clothing of our friends, the two hundred Sonderkommando men. The Germans had cremated them personally so that we wouldn't notice the deaths of our friends. The Germans were afraid that it would lead to an uprising. In early October 1944, on a Saturday morning four days after Yom Kippur, I visited my wife in the women's camp and told her, "I may not be here much longer because we're preparing an uprising."

Did you know anything about the uprising before it began?

Yes, we knew about it. We got instructions.

Who told you about it?

The Greek officer, Joseph Baruch, and the Russian major. Before the October 7 uprising began, various dates had been chosen but the uprising was postponed mainly because various underground groups in Auschwitz intervened.[43] We had a plan to wipe out several SS men, kill them, and escape.

What came of the plan in the end?

It wasn't carried out because there were too many difficulties. Every Sunday there were eleven or twelve soldiers armed with automatic weapons on the

crematorium premises. At each crematorium there were only two guards. We wanted to sneak up on them from either side, capture them, and in that way take as many weapons as we could and make a quick getaway, but it didn't work. As part of the plan, we were prepared to die for the entire camp, but actually we didn't succeed in the end. We didn't do it as we were really supposed to. The day the great uprising began, they ordered the Sonderkommando to cut back on the work because there were no more transports. They ordered some of us to go to the Sauna.[44] Those of us in Crematorium II [III] decided not to leave the area because we knew we were done for if we did. They began to beat us. We still didn't know a thing and suddenly we heard gunshots. We told ourselves that it would be better to wait there. We began to shout toward Crematorium I [II], which was across the way from us, "What's happening to you?" but we didn't get an answer. There was no one there at Crematorium I [II] by then. Later on, it turned out that there were no guards there. The men escaped but the Germans executed them by gunfire a kilometer behind the camp.

While a battle was raging outside, two Greek Jews came to Crematorium III [IV]: an artillery officer named Rudo and someone named Yitzhak Barsilai. There were explosives there and they blew everything into the air.[45] All 750 Sonderkommando men[46] from Crematorium III [IV] were killed except for the Kapo, Eliezer, who escaped to us.

The explosion took place fifteen minutes later. At Crematorium III [IV], there were hidden explosives that the Sonderkommando men had received from workers in the camp who were not prisoners—Polish technicians who'd provided the explosives for pay.[47] Suddenly twenty Germans came with dogs. They counted us and no one was missing. We were a hundred men. They led us down—all hundred Sonderkommando men from Crematorium II [III]—to the crematorium and shut us up in a room for half an hour. Some time later a guard, a *Kommandoführer* [squad commander] whose bicycle had been blown up came from the camp to the crematorium. He asked who blew up his bicycle. Two brothers stood up and confessed. The officer shot only one of them and ordered the other to cremate his brother's corpse.

Fifteen minutes later, five men were ordered to step out of line. I was one of the first five. They took us to Crematorium I [II]. When we got there, the officer ordered us to start working. At six P.M., they brought us the corpses of 850 Sonderkommando prisoners in carts. We had to cremate 750 men from Crematorium III [IV], where the uprising had taken place, and later on they also brought carts with the bodies of the hundred men from Crematorium I [II] who had fled and were captured outside the camp. As we began to do the cremating, the siren went off.

We stopped working at once and sat down. Afterwards, we continued to work. We told ourselves that our turn would come as soon as we'd finish burning everything here. We waited for ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Then an SS man came and said, "We're going to kill you all in a few more minutes." We thought they might kill us here, but we sure wouldn't go off without giving the Germans what they deserved. At midnight, the *Lagerkommandant* [camp commander] said, "I've received an order from Hitler to leave you men of Crematorium II [III] alive because you didn't take part in any action against us and stayed where you were." We thought it was a German bluff and that they'd surely kill us the next day. The next day, everything had been wiped out. Everything had been burned . . .

One the men who was in the Sonderkommando, a Greek named Leon Cohen, is still alive.[48] He was married to the daughter of a bank manager in Salonika. When Cohen was arrested and sent to Auschwitz, his wife fled with her father. Cohen, thinking that the end was approaching, took a sheet of paper and wrote, "Whoever finds this paper, please give it to my wife and tell her that I died." He signed the note and buried it in the crematorium yard.

Why was there no uprising in Crematorium II [III]?

It's hard to say that there was no uprising there. We were just as ready as the others but we didn't have an opportunity. We should have started the uprising a week earlier, but all of a sudden the Germans sent reinforcements of two thousand soldiers. We thought there was nothing to gain by taking risks. They left the camp several days later, and then we scheduled the beginning of the uprising for Sunday, October 7, 1944. We knew that we could overcome the two guards without much difficulty. Afterwards we wanted to escape from the camp. At five in the afternoon, eleven Germans with automatic weapons were on patrol near us. We decided to attack them and swipe their weapons. We figured that one of us would surely be killed, but if we were armed we'd have a better chance of moving ahead and liberating part of Birkenau.

We were also in contact with the partisans. At Crematorium I [II], there was a Russian major who initiated these contacts. The Polish workers in the camp also helped us stay in touch with the outside world. We had a plan but we didn't have a suitable opportunity. At the time of the uprising on October 7, 1944, the people at Crematorium I [II] should have reported to us about what was happening, but they fled before they could tell us anything. We didn't know what was going on and we stayed behind. We heard gunshots, we heard the explosion, but we didn't know where it was all coming from. We remained by ourselves, and our failure to take part in the uprising may have saved our lives. Otherwise, we would probably have been executed as well.

When were the murders in the gas chambers stopped for good?

The exterminations continued until October 31, 1944.[49]

Do you believe that the Sonderkommando uprising had an effect on stopping the exterminations?

It didn't make a bit of difference anymore, because large transports weren't coming anymore. The whole operation was shut down twenty days after the uprising, and then they began to demolish the crematoria. It was a very tense time for us; we thought they'd kill us so we wouldn't reveal the truth about Auschwitz to the world.

How did you manage to be liberated?

On November 1, we got an order to demolish the crematoria. We and the prisoners at the Auschwitz camp were busy with that until January 18, 1945. That day, we went to work at ten A.M. but we were ordered to return quickly. The *Lagerkommandant* came and informed us that the day to leave the Birkenau camp had come. Then came the order: "Sonderkommando men—step aside!" We were sure that our time was up and that we'd be executed in the afternoon.

Do you remember what you said to each other?

We agreed that we'd kill any German who came near us before he could kill us. We didn't want them to lead us away like lambs to the slaughter.

How did you intend to kill the Germans?

With knives. We all had good knives.

Where did you get knives?

We always carried them in our pockets. We never went anywhere without them.

Why did you need the knives?

To slice bread and things like that.

And for work?

No. When we finally left Birkenau, we didn't take the knives along. We left them behind.

Why do you think the Germans didn't kill you before they evacuated the camp? It couldn't have been their intention to leave the Sonderkommando workers alive.

No one really knows why. Evidently it's because we'd mingled with the rest of the prisoners and no one could tell us apart anymore. Then tremendous chaos broke out and the SS men couldn't guard us properly.

Fortunately, at the last moment we decided to retreat together with the rest of the people in the camp. First we went to the stores and took out bread, margarine, beef, clothing, and blankets. Between 5:00 and 5:15 P.M. on January 18, 1945, we began marching from Birkenau to the main camp, Auschwitz.

We stayed in Auschwitz until midnight. An icy wind was blowing; it was twenty degrees [Celsius] below zero and snowing. We began to march and left Auschwitz behind. We heard bangs every second. Anyone who couldn't march was shot. The snow was reddened with blood. Around ten the next morning we came to a Polish village. Several prisoners of Polish origin knew the roads and the language and escaped. Then we came to Bratislava. The Germans watched over us and marched with us all that time. Anyone who slowed down or fell to the ground was shot there and then. We spent the first night in some village, near the barns, in the snow, outdoors, while the Germans slept indoors, sheltered from the cold. The story repeated itself the next day. On the third day we came to a town and slept in rooms. The next morning, the march continued. Afterwards, we were hauled around in open railroad cars for about eight days; the only thing we had to eat was snow. On February 2 or 3, 1945, we reached Mauthausen.[50] There I saw lots of Spaniards who had escaped from Franco, and Belgians, too.

We were asked, "How come everyone else is starving to death and only you men look healthy?" We didn't tell them that we'd been in the Sonderkommando. We said that we'd done all sorts of work and that we just survived. During our month in Mauthausen we got nothing to eat in the morning. At ten o'clock we had turnip soup, sometimes with bread, sometimes without.

A few days later, we were asked if any of us wanted to work and each of us was asked about our occupations. I said I was a "print worker." By mistake, they wrote down "engraver." They took me to Gusen I[51] and put me in front of a machine that I didn't know how to use. It was a munitions factory, but I got along. There were French and Italian technicians there who helped me. My job was to fix rifle bolts. I fixed four hundred bolts every day. I worked at the Gusen camp from March until April 30, 1945. Somehow I held on until the end and didn't lose any weight. I reached Budapest healthy and unscathed, and I weighed seventy-six kilograms.

How were you liberated?

By May 2, we could already "smell" liberation in Gusen. We saw the Red Cross flag for the first time, and there were no SS men in the camp anymore, just guards and war criminals. Also, from that day on there was no more work. We were pretty filthy, since we hadn't had a chance to bathe for a month. On May 5, we were ordered to report for a roll call. Twelve thousand people reported. From far away, we heard the American tanks approaching. We shouted in unison, "The Americans are coming!" The German guards told us that they couldn't be Americans because the Germans had won the war.

The moment they began counting, the gates opened and the tanks rolled in. The guards fled right away. Five minutes later the American commander

climbed onto a watchtower equipped with a submachine gun, moved the gun aside, and called out, "From this day on, all peoples are brothers except for Germany!" That's how I was liberated.

It was a strange feeling. We weren't happy. We knew that the war was over but we Jews didn't have parents or families. No one had survived.

The French and the Italians were the first to be repatriated. I was in a group of fifty-four Greeks including sixteen Jews and Christian Greeks who had evidently been political prisoners. We spent another month in Gusen. I was healthy, thank God. I lived with another three friends in the home of a German officer. We took food from the village; we went down there with twenty other men and used force to get chickens and meat.

An American truck drove us to Oberg, a point on the frontier between the American army and the Russian army. A Russian train delivered us to Vienna, which was almost totally destroyed at the time. I stayed there for four days and then we were transported to Hungary, to Budapest. Finally we came to Skopje, Yugoslavia, and from there to the Greek border.

In other words, you went back to your country after the war.

Yes. I was there for three months. I reached Greece via Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary—where I spent a month and a half—and Yugoslavia, where I stayed for twenty days—until I finally reached Greece in August 1945. I worked there first as a printer and also as a journalist.

Why did you return to Greece? Weren't you reluctant to return to your hometown?

I still had family there; my uncles were still alive. When I returned to Greece four months after the liberation, I could hardly get used to the atmosphere there. When I saw Salonika without its Jewish population, it hurt me badly. I wandered around the cities where I'd been as a boy, trying to find my way back to civilization, but I did not succeed. I looked for relatives in Salonika but found only friends. I was asked where I'd been, in what jungle.

Did you tell anyone your story from Auschwitz?

I saw no point in doing that because I couldn't exactly describe the reality that we had lived through there. But when I began to feel like a member of society again and to reflect about what I'd done there, it caused me a lot of pain. It still does, whenever I talk about it.

Were you able to find your wife again?

I looked for Lora, my wife. One of my friends from Gusen I, Peppo Ezrati, went to Mauthausen after the liberation. There he encountered my wife by chance and told her that I'd survived. I didn't know that she'd survived. I was in Athens when the news reached me that she was in Salonika. I found her in a convalescent home. I managed to move her to a convalescent home in Athens

with the help of a Greek administrator from the Joint [American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee] named Modiano. It was a difficult reunion. It was hard for me to see her in her condition, but we were happy to see each other again.

We stayed in Athens until May 21, 1949. I worked for the Joint. Our daughter, Rosa, was born. People tried to talk me into moving to Italy, but we wanted to emigrate to the land of our forefathers—Israel.

When did you reach Israel?

I left Greece on May 21, 1949, and reached my destination, Israel, on May 24. Here in Israel, I had relatives who'd come in 1932. At first I thought about joining a kibbutz, but after we met some friends we decided to join a moshav. Life was hard but we had an ideal, resolve, and a goal. We knew that no one here would call us "dirty Jew."

Did you ever return to Auschwitz?

I had an opportunity to go to Auschwitz about a year ago but my wife didn't want to stay behind alone, so the trip didn't work out.

Do you still reflect about what happened in Auschwitz? Did you dream about Auschwitz?

No, sometimes I'm reminded of it but I don't dream. I've never dreamed about it. The past is past. I live in the present.

Are you ashamed to tell your story? To share it with people who hadn't been there?

No, I'm not ashamed, my conscience is clear. It is the Germans who should be ashamed, not me. It hurts, but I'm not ashamed. It's a little hard to tell people what happened before 1945. It's hard to describe what we experienced and what we saw. It's hard, so hard to believe. Can one believe these things, can one believe that the Germans committed such atrocities? It's hard to believe. The whole thing is really hard to believe. Just the same, it happened.

Did you ever describe your experiences to your daughter?

Of course. My grandchildren, too. I have a twelve-year-old grandson; he wrote it all down. I also told my two granddaughters everything. One of them graduated from school a year ago and is working for a lawyer; the other is in twelfth grade this year. They all know about it. I've always told my children everything, from the time they were small.

Did your children want to hear your story?

Yes, and my wife told hers, too. After all, she was in Birkenau, too. But today's young people aren't interested in listening, unfortunately. That's how I see it. I want the young people to know that it wasn't a figment of the imagination. It really happened. It was the fate of the Jewish people. With my own eyes I saw millions of Jews being slaughtered. On the other hand, lots of young

people go to Poland and visit Auschwitz and see everything. I am strongly in favor of this.

Where did you meet these young people?

I was in charge of security for two schools in Kefar Sava. Also, on Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day I always spoke with people and told them everything. I worked there until 1975; then I went over to the municipality of Kefar Sava and worked as a gardener. For seven years I served in the Civil Guard, and I also told them a lot there.

What is your brother doing today?

My brother has been living in the United States for the past thirty-eight years. He was with me in the Sonderkommando but he doesn't want to tell, to hear, or to remember a thing. He worked at Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] and then, with a great effort, we managed to reunite the family. Two of our cousins and my brother and I managed to get together and we worked together until the end. But when we left Auschwitz, he went to Melk[52] and Ebensee.[53] After he was liberated there, he returned to Greece and worked as a secretary for the Joint. For the past thirty-eight years he's been running a large curtain factory in Los Angeles.

In your daily life, do you find yourself mired in that period? Have you been affected by it in any way?

The whole thing has passed. Everything passes. It's behind me. I survived because I'd hoped to emerge from Auschwitz alive from the moment I'd entered. I survived because I was optimistic. Now, as I sit here and tell you the whole thing, I ask myself, "How can a human being put up with such a thing? How can he endure?" Well, man is stronger than iron. *C'est la vie, mon cher ami*—to pass, to last, to cast aside.

5

Eliezer Eisenschmidt: "Thanks to One Polish Family . . ."

Eliezer Eisenschmidt was a difficult interlocutor. At first he was unwilling to be interviewed. Afterwards, health problems sidelined him from the interviews for many months; appointments I set up with him were postponed again and again. However, I did not give up—and it was a good thing, too. I was very interested in Eliezer Eisenschmidt's story because he had spent a very long time in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Eventually, we held twelve talks. One of them took place in Birkenau itself, in September 1993. However, he gave me most of his information in his modest apartment in Givatayim. His wife, Yehudit, a splendid woman whose health was also shaky, was always at his side. Eliezer's only concern was for his wife. Each time we met, he added something that he had not mentioned in the previous interview. His memory is associative; he never presented me with a linear, chronological account.

Since then, Eliezer Eisenschmidt seems to have recovered his health. He looks young for his age, continues to work in a large enterprise, and has even resumed driving. Eisenschmidt bubbles with humor; even when asked to speak about his experiences at Auschwitz-Birkenau, he always spices the grim stories with a little anecdote. That taught me something: a person can be reminded of Auschwitz and continue to smile.

Eliezer Eisenschmidt owes his life to a Polish family that lived near Birkenau

and took him in after he escaped from the death march from Auschwitz to Mauthausen. To this day, he finds ways to express his gratitude to the children of that family. I witnessed this at a moving encounter that took place at Birkenau in the summer of 1993.

His term of internment at Birkenau was a great personal tragedy but not the only one. Another tragedy befell him in Israel, of all places, the country of which he had dreamed since he was a boy. When the conversation turned to a portrait of a young man on his living room wall, Eisenschmidt explained that the person in the photo was his grandson, a soldier who, during his military service, died in a road accident several kilometers from his grandfather's home. As he explained this, tears welled in his eyes and he said, "That was worse than anything that happened to me in Auschwitz." I believed him.

In the main, Eisenschmidt's recollections provided a wealth of small details and reflections on the atmosphere in Birkenau that enlivened the dry rendering of facts. The lack of chronological order and Eisenschmidt's associative shifts from topic to topic made this chapter somewhat difficult to write. Even though I interviewed him often, I do not believe that I probed the deepest recesses of his memory. I wish him, his wife, his children, and his grandchildren good health. And I add a wish for myself—that I be his guest many more times.

Eliezer, please describe your upbringing briefly.

I was born in Lunna,[1] White Russia. It's on the southern bank of the Neman River. It was made up of two cities that had merged: Lunna and Wola. My parents had a beverage factory. I attended a Hebrew school called Torah va-Da'at. Classes were taught in Hebrew except for one hour a week in Polish. Polish was the official language. We were three brothers: I was the oldest, and after me came Avraham and Ya'akov.

How would you define your parent's home? Traditional or religious?

The atmosphere at home was typically Jewish. We observed the religious commandments and the tradition. We kept strictly kosher. Father went to shul [synagogue] for morning services every day. After I graduated from primary school, I went to the technical school in Grodno.[2]

In retrospect, how do you view that period?

Nostalgically. The technical school was very tough. Three years of practical work prepared me for the engineers' licensing test. After I completed my studies, I went home. My father's health wasn't too good. He had a ruptured disk and had to stop working and stay home for a whole year. So I had to help out with the family business. World War II began at the end of that year. The Russians occupied the area where we lived. We spent two years under Russian occupation.[3]

Did you work at your father's factory during that time?

No. We had to close the factory because there was a shortage of raw materials for manufacturing. A celluloid factory had been established next door, and I found work as a skilled laborer there. When that plant also shut down, I went to work for a place that made fuel tanks. The Russians already ran that factory. I also found work in the lumber industry. That's where we worked until June 22, 1941, when the war between Germany and the USSR began.

Did the beginning of the war take you by surprise? Were there any early indications?

The war hit us like a bolt from the blue. It was a Sunday morning. In many homes, parties from the previous night hadn't ended yet. The Germans' offensive came from nowhere. There were four airfields around our city. That morning, the Germans destroyed four thousand Russian aircraft on the ground. They were fairly modern bombers, which the USSR had stationed in White Russia at that time.

How did you family respond to the beginning of war?

We felt the Germans' iron fist from the moment they invaded our area. Right away they began attacking Jews and looting their property. I remember that right after the Germans moved in I considered escaping to the Russian-controlled area. My brother and I packed a few things, loaded them onto our bicycles so that we wouldn't have to carry them on our backs, and rode toward the Soviet border. We got as far as Nowogrodek.[4] It turned out that the Germans had already surrounded us. They'd come from the direction of Lithuania, which had given them safe passage. Because we were surrounded, we decided to go home. Within two weeks, we were back home again.

In the meantime, what was happening in Lunna?

They'd imposed rules against the Jews. We had to wear yellow armbands. Every morning we had to assemble in the town square, where the Germans drafted the young men for forced labor for German soldiers. For example, we had to feed and groom the horses and clean the wagons. Some of the jobs were forced on us just to humiliate us. This lasted for a few weeks. In October 1941, they put out an edict to drive all the Jews into a ghetto. Jakob Welbel was the chairman of the *Judenrat*. After him came Abraham Jedwab and Zalman Schneor. Schneor was also the head of the Jewish police. I also remember Berl Kaplan and Zalman Gradowski from the Jewish leadership. Gradowski headed the health department of the *Judenrat*. Later on, in the Sonderkommando, Gradowski wrote up lists of transports and described our work. He buried his writings in bottles for future generations.[5]

Were you one of those who'd been drafted for forced labor?

Yes, I took part in all kinds of labor that they forced on us. Among other

things, I remember that we were sent to build the Berlin-Moscow road, to a work site about fifty kilometers from town. The Germans drafted forced laborers from the whole area for that job. One day they came to the ghetto and ordered the *Judenrat* to select 120 single men. I was one of them. They sent us out to build roads. Later on I did farm labor on the farm of a Polish policeman. I helped him with the work in the fields, loaded bales of hay on the carts, and so on.

Later on we had to dismantle burned aircraft or bombers, tanks, and other destroyed military equipment. One day while I was still working there, a non-Jewish acquaintance of my parents passed by and told me, "The Germans are wiping out the Jews. If you want, you can gather up a few of your friends and bring them to me. We'll move you over to the partisans." I rounded up a few older friends and we told others what the man had said. The rumor spread around the ghetto and the *Judenrat* also found out about it. In response, I was immediately sent to work outside the ghetto.

Was this action of yours—spreading the information—part of the reason that you were removed from the ghetto?

No doubt about it. They wanted to keep me at a distance. I came down with typhus in November. It was already terribly cold by then. For lack of choice I contacted my parents' acquaintance, who said, "You have to stay in bed for a few weeks until you get better. Then you can return to the ghetto." After I returned to the ghetto, they sent me and the rest of the Jews to the Kielbasin camp.

Do you remember when they sent the Jews from the ghetto to Kielbasin?

On November 20, 1942. There was no partial deportation in our case, as there was in other cities. The whole population was deported in one go. Once and for all. In the morning they removed us from town and by that evening, after a forty-kilometer march, we were already in the camp. Kielbasin was originally a camp for Russian prisoners of war. When I got there with my brothers and parents, they sent me straight to the infirmary because I hadn't totally recovered from the typhus. Next to me lay a friend, who was also sick with typhus.

Were you sent from Kielbasin to Auschwitz?

Yes. Transports set out from this camp every Saturday night, with a population from a different city each time. Lunna's turn came on December 5, 1942, the third night of Hanukka. We were in the barracks when we heard about the deportation. I remember that Grodowski's wife, who was a good singer, wanted to sing *Ma'oz Tsur* with us. I'll never forget that sight, all the Jews standing up in the barracks just before the deportation and singing *Ma'oz Tsur*. We didn't light Hanukka candles because there weren't any candles.

When I remember it, I feel uneasy. It was very moving. When I found out about the deportation, I left the infirmary right away and joined my family. The people in this transport were not only from Lunna-Wola but from other towns as well.

That night we walked to the Lasosna train station and they packed us into freight cars. There were also a few passenger cars. By chance we found a passenger car. Everyone tried to stay near members of their family and take care of them. The most important thing was to keep the whole family together and not to be left alone.[6]

Did you take any belongings or gear for the trip?

By then we had very little left, because we'd started out from the Kielbasin camp, not from our homes. We had only a few things. Our food, such as pearl barley and lentils, had been taken from us and brought to the general mess at Kielbasin.

How long did the trip take?

Three days.

Can you describe it?

I have this picture of feeble people who had none of the things that you need for a trip like that. They had room for only one thought: how to get a little water. In sheer despair they tried to catch snowflakes. We ate nothing during the entire trip. We were hungry the whole way. I remember when we reached the outskirts of Bialystok, my father said something like, "You see, we're definitely going to survive. Unless the train turns left, we're not going to Treblinka."

How did he know this?

Father must have heard about Treblinka from Jews from Grodno who'd been at the Kielbasin camp. The Jews in that area were better informed.

Did the transport stop from time to time?

There were several stops along the way but we weren't allowed to get off. The doors weren't opened, either.

Not even to air out the cars?

No, not even to let fresh air in. Little windows in the sides of the cars let some air in. At the first few stops, there were people outside, who came up to the cars. A few of us begged through the windows for a little water, so we could at least moisten our lips. Several of them were willing to bring us water but the Germans didn't let them near the cars. Only a few of them were able to go up to the cars and serve the thirsty people some water.

What did people do when they had to go to the bathroom?

To the best of my recollection, we used rags and threw them out the windows.[7]

We traveled that way until the morning of December 8, 1942, the sixth day of Hanukka. That's when we reached Auschwitz. There were four relatives with me in the car: my parents and my two brothers.

What happened after the doors of the cars were opened?

The moment they opened the doors, the Germans prodded us to get out fast. They shouted, "Raus! Raus!" ["Out! Out!"] Germans with big, terrifying dogs stood next to the doors. On the platform we saw prisoners; you could tell they were prisoners because they wore "pajama uniforms." I know now that they belonged to the "Kanada" Kommando, the ones who gathered our bundles and suitcases from the railroad cars.

Did any of you try to make contact with these prisoners?

I myself didn't try to speak with them. Maybe somebody else in the transport spoke with them. In any case, I didn't. Later, the selection for life or death began. A German sent me, one of my brothers, and my father to one side, and my other brother and mother to the other side. They climbed onto a truck and I never saw them again. They were sent straight to the gas chamber.

Do you remember the whole process?

Sure. Everyone had to pass in front of the Germans and one of them pointed to the right or to the left. After the *Selektion*, they took the 315 people who were left over from the transport, including my brother and me, and marched us several kilometers to Birkenau. There we went through all the procedures for intake into the camp.

What procedures are you referring to?

Mainly, registration. They took us to Block 20. There we lined up in alphabetical order. Afterwards they tattooed numbers into our forearms. It was done by two Jews from France.

What was your number?

Eighty thousand seven hundred sixty-four. 80764. My brother was given the number eighty thousand seven hundred sixty-five.

What did they do with you after the tattooing?

The tattooing took hours. Afterwards, they gave us some soup. The workers in this transit block took the opportunity to tell us, "If you have valuables, give them to us because they'll take them away from you later anyway." From there we were led to the shower rooms. They took away our clothing and shaved all our hair. After the shower, they gave us clothes, not the clothes that we wore on the way to the camp but clothes that didn't fit our size and the shape of our bodies. We could get small shoes, large shoes, or two left shoes. From there we were taken to Block 9, where we were allocated sleeping bunks. In the evening we also got the daily food ration: bread and something else. "Something else"

included a quarter of a loaf of bread and sometimes some margarine or a little jam. On very rare occasions, they added a bit of horse sausage.

Were all the people who'd been chosen in the selection and not sent to the gas chamber together in the barracks?

Yes, all the 315 people who remained from the transport reached Block 9.

What were living conditions in the barracks like?

Five or six prisoners slept on each bunk. The upper bunk was preferred. The lucky ones slept up there, but it was colder in the third tier of bunks. Those who got places on the lowest level had to crawl into them like snakes. But it was warmer there. Each level had its advantages and disadvantages. We were given flimsy blankets to protect us from the terrible cold.

The person in charge of us was the block elder. Apart from him, several prisoners had jobs in the barracks—barrack room duty and main barrack room duty. Those who worked as barrack room duty were responsible for keeping the rooms clean and tidy and distributing food to the prisoners.

The next morning we had to report for a head count. Right afterwards, we began work, digging gravel to make cement. We dug out the gravel in the compound of Camp C.[8] Under a layer of soil at least a meter and a half thick was a forty-centimeter layer of gravel. It was then that they were building Camps A, B, C, D, and E.[9] The Germans used the gravel to make cement and concrete. We dug the gravel out and took it away.

Do you remember your first day of work in the Sonderkommando? Do you still remember the exact date?

Yes, I remember the exact date. It was December 9, late in the evening. At suppertime we suddenly heard someone call in German: "Everyone report!" We ran outside as the guards shouted, "Raus! Raus!" We had to line up fast in ranks of five. Eighty or a hundred people were selected for the Sonderkommando of Block 2. Everything went fast. We were taken to the barracks and they closed the gates on us. That was that. I left a piece of bread in Block 9 and never saw it again. The Sonderkommando prisoners were divided into two groups at that time, Sonderkommando I and Sonderkommando II, because they worked in Bunker I and Bunker II. I was in the Sonderkommando I group.[10]

Please explain exactly how prisoners were chosen for the Sonderkommando. Did the Germans select them on the basis of some criterion?

No. All that mattered in the *Selektion* was that they were strong young men. I stood there with my brother; they took me for the Sonderkommando and they didn't take him. They mustn't have liked him. Maybe he wasn't strong enough for them.

Did they examine the men thoroughly to determine their physical condition?

No, the examination was superficial, short, and fast, just like the selection on the platform. In all, 450 men were chosen. Afterwards we marched in ranks of five to the barracks and they closed the gates on us. That was that.

Did you have to undress for this Selektion?

No, we didn't have to undress that time.[11]

Where in Birkenau was the selection for the Sonderkommando held?

On the left side of the camp from the entrance, in the area where the stone buildings stood. Later, that compound served as the women's camp, the FKL (*Frauenkonzentrationslager*). At that time, there were only two camps in Birkenau: A and B. A was for men prisoners and B was for women prisoners.[12]

Who did the selection for the Sonderkommando?

SS men. They called us for a head count, pulled us out of the barracks, and didn't let us return. They surrounded us with especially large forces and began to select the number of workers that they wanted from the whole barracks. As I said, they didn't take my brother.

How long did the selection take?

The whole selection took no more than ten minutes. Truth to tell, I couldn't begin to grasp what was happening there, since I'd only arrived a few days earlier and was a total greenhorn in the camp. How could I understand what was going on there, why the *Selektion* took place? When they brought us there, SS men with dogs surrounded us. The dogs were sometimes more dangerous than the SS men. A few months later, we saw them training dogs in the forest, on the path between Crematorium III [IV] and Crematorium IV [V], not far from the Sauna building[13] and the compound of the "Kanada" Camp. When we got to Block 2, we were in shock. The barracks was totally empty, but to our astonishment there was an unbelievable quantity of food there. We were amazed. "What's happening here? Where have the Germans brought us? What a palace!" I remember that there were potatoes and loaves of bread there. I began to eat until I remembered exactly where we were. It was very satisfying, since it had been two days since we'd eaten anything to speak of. In the barracks, they divided us into four groups. There were four rows of sleeping bunks there, and each of us chose a bunk for himself.

Was that the Sonderkommando barracks?

Yes, Block 2 was reserved for the Sonderkommando men. Block 1 was for the *Strafkommando* [penal detail][14] and Block 3 was for "regular" prisoners.

What became of your brother?

They assigned him to Block 9. He held on for three weeks and then he died.

When did you first hear the word "Sonderkommando" and realize that you were part of it?

It was the morning after the head count on December 10, 1942. When we went out to the forest, we heard the Kapo tell the SS men who stood at the gate, "Sonderkommando I, 130 men."

Please describe your first day in the Sonderkommando.

There was another head count the next day. They removed Jews whose serial numbers were higher than 38000. Most of them had been deported from France to Birkenau in June and July 1942. Afterwards, the job assignments were handed out: Kapo, foreman, and so on. We were divided into two groups: Sonderkommando I and Sonderkommando II. There were about 150 men in each group. On our way out, we were surrounded at the gate by SS men with dogs and they led us into the forest.

There we were divided up again. One group was assigned to work in the room where the valuables were kept, in order to sort the murdered people's clothes. the second group was tasked with cremating bodies. The Germans asked, "Are any of you barbers?" Several men stepped forward and were given scissors. Later on, they asked, "Are any of you dentists?" Again a few men stepped forward and were given pliers.[15] The rest were divided into groups of six. For example, six men pushed the carts that carried the bodies, another six were *Shlepern,* the ones who dragged corpses to the carts.

Since the Germans divided us into groups before they opened the doors of the gas chamber, we didn't know what work they were talking about. Obviously, when I stood with the group of six that would be in charge of carts, I didn't know what we'd have to load into the carts. In the ghetto, when I worked at the sawmill I'd gained some experience in working with carts. But there we carried boards on the carts. We hauled them to a ferry and then unloaded them.

They led us into the yard and opened the door of the building that was used as a gas chamber, and we were overwhelmed with grief. We were in absolute shock. We'd never seen anything like this in our worst nightmares. To this day, I can see in my mind's eye what we saw behind the doors as they opened. A dead woman stood there, naked, her body doubled up. We froze. We couldn't grasp what was happening there. We saw the bodies in the gas chamber. When we began to remove the bodies, we saw how they'd become a single mass.

Then came new orders: "*Shlepern:* go in with gas masks and take the bodies out. Dentists: examine the mouths of the bodies for gold teeth and then rip them out with the pliers. Barbers: cut their hair with the scissors." The *Shlepern* were told to load the bodies on to the carts and then throw them into the pits. Another group there was called the *Heizer* (stokers); its job was to keep an eye on the fire in which the bodies were cremated.

When we heard these terrible orders, we were stung to the quick. As I said, I belonged to the group that loaded the bodies onto the carts. For a few minutes, I was too revolted to touch a body. Such a thing had never happened to me. Obviously I wasn't the only one in the group who felt revulsion. I couldn't work until someone hit me hard on the back with a rod. Then I realized that there was no escape, that I couldn't back away. I had to accept the idea and the situation. You have to understand—we had no choice whatsoever. That was my fate. Anyone else in my situation would have behaved the same way.

Together with me in the group were four brothers from Makow[16] and another Jew. Six men stood at each cart. Four stood at one side, grabbed the bodies by their hands and legs, and threw them onto the cart as you'd throw a bundle, and the other two stood on the other side of the cart and made sure that the bodies didn't fall off. Then we wheeled the cart to the pit, where the "fire brigade" workers were waiting. They took the bodies from the carts to the edge of the pit. They were the ones who threw the bodies into the pits.

The pits, or "bunkers," as they were also called, were wide and deep. The fire was started before the bodies were thrown in. To make the compound ready for use as a murder location—before that, there was a Polish village called Brzezinka there—the wooden houses of the village were taken apart and the beams were put at the bottom of the pits. They served as a base and the bodies were thrown onto them. Six carts were used to haul the bodies. The groups took turns bringing their carts to the pits with their loads of bodies. After the bodies were thrown in, we went back with the carts to bring new bodies. Ten to fifteen bodies were loaded onto each cart.

How many hours did you work each day?

When I was first in the camp, the working hours were usually irregular. After the bodies were burned and the gas chambers were cleaned up, they took us back to the camp. Once we worked for thirty-six hours almost nonstop. Later on, in the spring of 1943, when the new crematorium buildings were put up, the Sonderkommando did its work in a totally different way.

After all the bodies were placed in the pits, the "stokers" took gasoline and set the wooden beams on fire. As the fire burned, the "stokers" piled the bodies into a heap so that they'd burn faster. The Germans designed the cremation procedure so that the fat of the bodies would fuel the fire. In other words, the bodies themselves were the fuel.[17]

When we got there, the pits were still empty and they hadn't yet begun to burn the bodies. So the intensity of the fire depended on the wooden beams that were soaked with fuel. Later on, the fire was fed by the fat of the bodies that remained in the pits. It took a whole day and sometimes even a day and a

half to cremate the bodies in one pit. When there were no more corpses to burn, we had to cut down trees and clean up the gas chamber.

Did you know that these were the bodies of Jews?

No. We didn't know at first, but other workers who'd been there longer, like the Kapo Daniel, told us very quickly. He told one of us and the bitter truth spread fast: Jews were being murdered in that building and it was our job to throw them into the burning pits. Obviously, as things continued, we realized this by ourselves when we saw that the men were circumcised. Many also wore necklaces with Stars of David.

Do you remember how the victims were forced to undress?

Of course I do. They brought them all to wooden shacks, which served as undressing rooms. They used to be stables. The people were forced to undress there and then they had to run naked to the house that was used as the gas chamber. They had to run across the compound naked in all kinds of weather.[18]

Did the victims know what was awaiting them when they reached the compound?

I don't know. At that moment, I had no contact with the people. I think none of them wanted to believe that the worse thing possible was awaiting them, even if they sensed that something was amiss.

Can you describe the first gas chamber, the one that used to be a cottage?

On the door there was a sign saying, "Shower."[19] There were two entrances: one to lead the victims in and another to take the bodies out. The "Shower" sign was posted on the other door, right opposite the entrance door.

In what language was the sign?

Only in German. All the windows and openings of the building were sealed with rubber gaskets to keep the gas from leaking out. After the room filled up with people, the doors were closed. Next, an SS man came over with the Zyklon gas in his hand. He put on a gas mask, opened the canister of gas, and threw the contents in. Shortly after the gas was thrown in, the people began to smell it[20] and then we heard them shout "Shema Yisrael . . ." from the interior of the gas chamber. The German called out to his comrades scornfully, "They're calling "schmeiss rein, schmeiss rein" — "throw it in, throw it in . . ."

Did they all enter the gas chamber together?

Yes — men, women, and children, all of them together.

How long did the gassing take?

About twenty minutes.

Were all the people in the chamber dead after twenty minutes?

Yes, but to make sure of it the Germans waited a little longer before the doors were opened. Only the Germans themselves opened the door of the gas

chamber. They didn't assign that job to anyone else. It was always that way. They didn't allow the Jews, meaning us, to open the door.

How long did it take from the time the door was opened until the bodies were removed?

The bodies were removed right after the doors were opened.

The men who were given this duty were equipped with gas masks. Once they found a girl who apparently hadn't inhaled enough gas. She was unconscious but still alive and making gurgling sounds. A German corporal shot her upon Moll's order.[21]

During your work at the cremation pits, did you ever encounter the corpses of relatives or friends?

I once identified the corpse of a cousin. It was horrible. She'd been brought on January 23, 1943, in a late transport. I saw her after she'd been gassed.

To conclude your report on your work at the bunker, I have one more question: How long did you work there?

I worked there for about six months, from the day I arrived until the new crematoria were put into service in May and June 1943.[22]

At which crematorium did you work after May 1943?

Crematorium IV [V].[23]

What job were you given in the Sonderkommando after the new crematoria were built?

When we began to work in Crematorium IV [V], I told the Germans that I was an electrician. So they appointed me to be the electrician of the crematorium. Until then, for six months, I'd worked at the bunker with the bodies every single day. In the crematorium building they gave me a small workroom behind the cremation facilities, next to the coal house. That's where the coal was kept. There was a laundry facility next door, and next to that a door led to some latrines. The Germans knocked down the walls in between and made them into one room, the electrician's room.

Why did you declare yourself to be an electrician?

The Germans were looking for people with useful trades, like carpenters and shoemakers. When they asked for an electrician, I stepped forward.

Were there any more electricians in the Sonderkommando?

Yes, there was a Jew from France who was also put to work as an electrician, but I don't remember his name.

What were your duties as an electrician in the Sonderkommando?

The electrician did several jobs. For example, every now and then you had to replace burned-out arc lamps in the corridors. Things like that.

Did you belong to the Sonderkommando during your term of service as an electrician?

Yes, of course I worked in the Sonderkommando. Even when I worked as an electrician, I saw the exterminations every day. In October 1944, after the Sonderkommando uprising broke out, only thirty men in my building survived, but I stayed there, too. I was put back to work cremating dead people or prisoners who'd been executed. I did this once a week or so, when the Germans executed a certain number of prisoners. We could tell by their clothing that some of them were Russian prisoners of war. At that time, the surviving Sonderkommando men were given the following duties: one of us took care of the furnaces, someone else pushed the corpses into the furnaces. I'd like to add that on days when there was no work I was given a scythe to weed the camp compound. They fed the weeds to the horses.

Can you describe the crematorium building from memory?

It was a square building with two chimneys. The SS men had an office near the entrance and next to it were two latrines. Alongside them were the coal house and the furnaces. A hallway led to the gas chambers. The outer wall of the gas chambers had little windows; the gas was thrown in through them.

There was another gas chamber for small groups of victims, eighty to a hundred people. There, too, the gas was thrown in through a small window. The corpses of the murdered people were stored in a large room and from there they were taken to the furnaces. Next to the furnaces was a room with a safe where the Germans kept the victims' valuables, such as rings, earrings, and gold teeth. Two men sat in this room, jewelers by trade. Their job was to melt down the gold and make it into ingots that were sent to Germany. This room was opposite the coal house.

Did you ever come into contact with people who were awaiting death in the crematorium building?

Yes, the Sonderkommando men were able to circulate freely in the undressing room. The only restriction was that we were not allowed to make verbal contact with them, so there would be no possibility of warning them and sparking off a riot. I could circulate freely there but I couldn't stand and gab with people.

Did men and women undress together?

Yes. Always. Entire families came to the inner yard of the crematorium and they also went into the room together to undress. They were not separated in any way. They were all together in the gas chamber; men and women were not separated. In a few cases, the Germans wanted to do things differently and bring the men in first. But those cases didn't turn out well; the men tried to resist and there were beatings. I think knives were drawn, too. The Germans' conclusion was that the only way to do it quietly was to keep the victims together. In most cases, when a man tried to defend himself, his wife would say, "Calm down, maybe it won't be as terrible as you think."

Were there people who didn't want to undress?

There were religious Jews who refused to strip naked. Once there was a young woman from a very religious family who didn't want to undress. Her mother asked one of the Sonderkommando prisoners in the room not to force her daughter to undress totally. Let her go to the "shower" in her undergarments, she said. A naked man is absolutely defenseless. He loses his stability, his confidence, and his strength.

To whom did the mother address her request?

To our foreman, who was standing next to her. He said, "Very well, let her stay in her underwear. Go with her to the "shower" but make sure that none of the SS men notices it."

Was such a thing possible?

In certain cases you could elude the SS men, since the room was filled to capacity and you couldn't make out each individual person.

Do you remember other cases in which people wished to remain in their undergarments?

I saw Jews who kept some of their undergarments on.

How did the Germans react to this?

Sometimes, when they noticed it, they had a fit. Other times, they ignored it. When Moll saw somebody in underwear, he used his rod to strip him. But other Germans weren't as strict and didn't make anything of it.

How long did it usually take the people to undress?

It usually took half an hour to forty-five minutes. It depended on how many people were in the room. The SS men stood there and prodded the people along: "Faster! Faster!" They reminded people to tie their shoes into pairs so they wouldn't get "lost" or so that "Afterwards you won't have to waste time finding the other shoe."

Did you ever encounter acquaintances in the undressing room?

Once a friend told me that a cousin of mine had been brought over from the Buna camp.[24] I wasn't working on that particular shift. At Buna, he'd worked in the coal mines. There he got sick and became a *Muselmann*.[25] My cousin asked about me and my friend told him that maybe I could save him. But he didn't ask me to do that. Before he died, he asked for something totally different: "two slices of bread, so I won't die on an empty stomach." If I'd been there, I might have managed to save him. They gave him the bread, he ate, and he walked to the gas chamber. He knew where he was going.

What happened after the people undressed?

They were led down the corridor to the gas chamber. As one chamber filled up, they were taken to the second one and then to the third. That's how they

took everyone in the transport to their deaths. In our building, you could murder about two thousand people in one go.

What did the Sonderkommando men do after the people had been taken to the gas chamber?

We gathered up the clothing and things that the people had left behind after they'd undressed. We had thirty to forty-five minutes until the trucks came and hauled everything to the "Kanada" Camp. We used the time to find something for ourselves among the things. The SS men turned a blind eye when we searched through the clothing. However, they warned us not to take valuables and watched us to make sure we didn't.

Once as I was sorting and packing up the clothing, I picked up a bundle and an SS man noticed it. He grabbed me and shouted, "What are you doing?" I answered, "Look, I took the bundle but there's nothing in it for you. But if you want, I have something for you." He asked me what it was, and I answered, "In one bundle I found some coffee beans." Of course, I was willing to give him the box. He just said, "Very well," and left me alone.[26] I walked over to my bunk, where I'd put the bundle with the coffee, took it down, and gave it to him.

In fact, we had plenty of time to search thoroughly and find things. That's because we were alone in the undressing room apart from the few SS men. The truck drivers who drove the things to the "Kanada" Camp were not allowed to enter the crematorium. The Sonderkommando prisoners personally loaded the belongings onto the trucks, which drove straight to the property warehouse.

In the meantime, what was happening in the gas chambers?

After the people were asphyxiated from inhaling the gas, the doors were opened for ventilation[27] and afterwards the bodies were brought out and taken back to the undressing room.

Who took the bodies out of the gas chambers?

We removed one or two bodies by hand. Sometimes we used a long stick; we grabbed the body by the neck and pulled it out. It was better to use the stick than our hands, since many of the victims soiled themselves as they were being killed.[28] So we didn't want to touch the corpses with our hands; instead, we preferred to take them out with the stick. After the bodies were treated in the undressing room, they were taken to the furnaces. All the Sonderkommando prisoners took part in removing bodies from the gas chambers. Even those who usually worked elsewhere: the one who did gardening work in the crematorium yard or the one whose job was to bring coal to the furnaces. This was the most complicated and awkward work.

What do you mean by "after the bodies were treated"?

Before the bodies were put in the furnaces, special Sonderkommando prisoners checked them for gold teeth and ripped them out. Others had to cut their hair.

Can you describe how the bodies were cremated?

Our crematorium had eight furnaces, four on each side. Several bodies were placed in each furnace. Five Sonderkommando men stood at each furnace door: two on either side of the stretcher and one to pile the bodies into the furnace. Others brought the coal to the furnaces and were in charge of stoking them. They brought the coal from the coal house next to the SS office and the latrines. The coal they used to fire up the furnaces had undergone a chemical process. It was degassed so that so that it left a dry gray charcoal after it was burned. When it burned, it did not give off toxic gases. What is more, it created a more powerful fire.

Describe the stretchers that were used to push the bodies into the furnaces.

The stretchers looked like iron beds. The front end was bent down so that the bodies could be placed on the stretcher. When we reached the furnace doors, the stretcher was placed on two metal carts, on which you could push the stretchers into the furnace. One of the workers pushed the stretcher in; the two workers who stood at the sides helped him. Another worker held a long metal pitchfork, with which he could arrange the corpses in the furnace. He also pulled the stretcher out of the furnace. Afterwards, you had to pour water onto the stretcher because it had become superheated in the furnace. There was another problem: the bodies stuck together. The fire in the furnace was pretty hot.

Were the bodies from Crematoria I [II] and II [III] brought over in the same way?

No, a totally different method was used there. There the gas chambers were underground and the bodies were hauled up in an elevator. They loaded the bodies onto carts and took them to the furnaces just so. Each cartload of bodies was moved from furnace to furnace. The Sonderkommando men picked up the bodies, loaded them onto the stretchers, and pushed them into the furnaces. As they worked, the cart went on to the next furnace, where the process was repeated.

When bodies from the camp were brought to us, the process was different. We had an especially large furnace with four openings on each side. You could throw bodies in from each side. This furnace was fueled with anthracite coal. The fire caused the bones to settle to the bottom. As soon as they accumulated, they were removed with the rest of the remains that hadn't been burned by means of a special rake. After they cooled off, the remains were taken in carts

to a pit that had been dug outside. A few of our people pulverized the bones and the remains. Afterwards, the Germans trucked the ashes to the Sola River and dumped them into the water.

The Germans didn't want to bury the ashes in the pits because they might be discovered one day and that might endanger them. I was sometimes assigned to this work. To do it, we used a heavy hammer to smash the bones. In the spring and summer of 1944, when British and American aircraft overflew Auschwitz, we let the fire billow up the smokestacks because we hoped the pilots would notice it and bomb the crematoriums.[29] We heard the aircraft overhead but, to our disappointment, all we heard were distant bombardments. On their way back, they flew over the camp and we were left behind to stew in our bitterness. They didn't bomb Birkenau.

Did you have specific duties or did you switch jobs?

There was some flexibility and turnover in the duties. The barbers, the dentists, and the people at the furnaces usually didn't change places. The rest of us were assigned to jobs as needed. Sometimes pits had to be dug; sometimes they had to be covered up. Afterwards, the yard had to be raked. Those who didn't have regular jobs looked for something to keep active with. I remember someone who said that he knew how to make charcoal. He must have learned it in the town where he'd lived. We gathered wood of various kinds, piled it up, covered it with ashes, and started the fire. And the guy really did make charcoal out of it.

What did you do during "off" hours, when no transports reached Birkenau?

We looked for all sorts of things to do—for example, digging out pools of water, carrying things from place to place, all sorts of odd jobs. The main thing was not to be idle. When the Germans found out that I knew how to weed, they gave me a scythe so I'd cut the weeds and clean the yard. I had to pile up the weeds. Afterwards, forced laborers came over from Auschwitz and took the weeds away for the horses. We also had tailors who did tailoring work for the SS men and cobblers who made shoes and boots for them.

The scenes that you're describing here, the place where you were, were full of bodies and death. How could you live in such a reality?

For lack of choice, we got used to this routine. It became absolutely normal, as if life were really like that. What is more, the SS men didn't leave you any time to think. The work was supervised by the SS. You couldn't move an inch without the SS watching over you. We couldn't even move from Crematorium IV [V], where we lived, to Crematorium III [IV], which was next door. SS men circulated there all the time, and they had dogs who'd pounce on anyone at the slightest sign. We saw—I've already mentioned this—how they trained the dogs in the forest behind our building. The SS men who trained the dogs wore

prisoner clothes with a thick layer of cotton underneath so the dogs wouldn't hurt them.

I have to say that none of us was in control of our thoughts any longer. Eventually, we regarded our jobs at the crematorium as very ordinary jobs. We went about our work with a feeling that a gravedigger might have. An ordinary person who takes someone on his last journey gets emotional when the person is buried, but a gravedigger doesn't get emotional all over again each time. That's how it was in the Sonderkommando.

Did you get used to this reality at once, or was it a lengthy process?

It was a lengthy process, of course. We spent the first few days in total shock. I remember that all 150 men went to work and were escorted by twelve to fifteen SS men with their dogs. Each dog was more terrifying than three SS men. So we couldn't think about anything. The Germans used terror to suppress every thought and every emotion. The first few times that we did the work, they flogged us continuously. The only thing we did on our own was to turn our heads in order to deflect the terrifying beatings. We just wanted to avoid the beatings and we did whatever we did without any unnecessary thought.

Eventually, we got used to the routine. I'd define our state of mind as "indifference." I agree—it was an "indifference" that you couldn't define, let alone understand, considering what we had to do every day.

Anyone who wanted to escape from this reality had a sure but tragic way out: he could commit suicide. Do you know about cases of suicide among your friends?

There were hardly any suicides among the Sonderkommando prisoners. Right now, I recall only three cases. There was a Jewish policeman from Makow who swallowed twenty Luminal pills but didn't die. Two Jewish doctors committed suicide during the Sonderkommando uprising on October 7, 1944.

Let's dwell on the daily living conditions, such as the living quarters in the camp. Did the living conditions change after the new crematoria were activated?

The conditions definitely improved. We no longer worked outdoors in the rain or snow; now we worked in closed buildings. Technically, the work didn't change: gas chambers, bodies that had to be removed and taken into the furnaces. But we no longer stood in the rain and the mud. The soil in the compound with the bunkers was heavy and dark. After every rainstorm it turned into mud and muck; it made us skid as if we'd been walking on butter. In late 1943 or early 1944, we were all still living in the camp, in Blocks 11 and 13. This compound was fenced in because the Germans wanted to isolate the two

groups of prisoners who "lived" there from the other prisoners no matter what: the *Strafkommando* (Penal Detail) and ourselves, the Sonderkommando.

They'd fenced in the living area of the two groups and didn't allow the men there to leave the barracks freely. When we finished the work, we returned to the barracks and lived in a sort of quarantine. We were always under heavy guard. When we took the food, an SS man monitored us. We also had separate latrines and showers. They were in the middle of Blocks 11 and 13 and they weren't used by anyone except us and the Strafkommando people.

Today, the latrines at the Auschwitz memorial site are a disgusting sight. There are no partitions there. Were the latrines neat and clean?

More or less. The Germans appointed a few members of our group to clean the latrines. The block elder picked out a few men and the people on barrack room duty also made sure things were clean. Working in the latrines was considered easy and comfortable, since the workers there weren't beaten and it wasn't really grueling labor of the kind done by those who worked in the details outside. Only very select people were candidates for the latrine work. It was no simple matter to be accepted for that job.

When did you move to the crematorium building?

At a late stage, that is, in 1944. At that time, the Sonderkommando prisoners were given living quarters in Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]. A few of us moved to Crematoria I [II] and II [III], while others—about 120 to 160 men—had to continue living in the camp. In Crematoria I [II] and II [III], the people lived in the loft. Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] didn't have a loft at all; we lived on the ground floor there. After the Sonderkommando uprising, Crematorium III [IV] was totally deactivated. Only thirty men in our group survived, and it was their job to burn the bodies of the others.

Can you describe the living conditions there?

We slept on bunks, as we had in the other barracks. The Kapo was in charge of us, unlike the situation in the barracks, where the block elder was in charge of the prisoners.

Do you know whether the Sonderkommando prisoners in Crematoria I [II] and II [III] slept on beds?

To the best of my recollection, the workers there also slept on bunks. Each man may have had his own bunk. In any event, I never visited their loft because I couldn't circulate freely there. We went there just to take coal. Then our friends came down from the loft and we gabbed. But none of us was allowed to go up to the loft. The only possible exception was the foreman who escorted us.

What food were you given?

Prison food like the other prisoners received, plus something extra for "pro-

ductive labor": instead of the liter and a half of soup per day that ordinary prisoners received, we got two and a half liters. We also got potatoes, a little bran, vegetables that we couldn't identify, a quarter of a loaf of bread, something to spread on it—margarine or jam—and a little sausage. Twice a week we got a whole loaf of bread as a bonus.

Where did the food come from?

From the mess near the entrance to the camp. Most of the workers there were Russian prisoners of war. The Russians also built camps A and B in Birkenau. Those who remained alive were considered "veterans"; they worked in the mess and in the food warehouse.

Were the Sonderkommando prisoners able to take food that the victims had brought after they left it in the undressing room and went to the gas chambers?

Yes. That's the only way we could somehow stay alive. We did it with the Germans' permission.

Did they authorize it explicitly or did they overlook it in the sense of passive consent?

I can't tell you whether the Germans gave their official consent or just didn't pay attention. We couldn't know what orders they'd received from higher up. Whatever, the commander stood there with his men and didn't stop us from taking food.

What kinds of food did the people leave behind? How did you get hold of it?

There was every kind of food that you could imagine. Every transport brought the food that was typical of the people in it. When Jews came from Greece, they brought something that we'd never seen—olives. We thought they were plums. Each of us tasted one and spat it out. The French leaped on them as if they were royal delicacies. The Greek Jews also brought corn bread. Almost all of them had bread and olives. The Dutch Jews brought canned food and cheese sandwiches. Hungarian Jews brought smoked goose, a kind of meat that softened after you cooked it. In Hungary, after they slaughtered the goose, they hung the meat in a chimney to dry it. That way, you could eat the meat all summer without having to refrigerate it. They also brought dried breadcrumbs. Many of them had bacon; maybe they hadn't eaten it at home but they must have thought that it would keep better during the trip.

So you didn't suffer from hunger like the rest of the prisoners in the camp.

Sometimes we starved, too. When transports of Polish Jews came, they didn't bring a thing. On those days I made do with cooked potato skins. In our first period in Birkenau, too, while they were still cremating the bodies in pits, we didn't get the food that the victims had brought. People undressed in the sheds and left their clothing and their possessions there. We had no contact with them.

You asked how we got hold of the food that the murdered people had brought. It worked this way: after the people undressed, they were taken to the gas chamber. At that point we were called over to load the clothes and the other things onto the trucks. The whole load had to be taken to the valuables warehouse and sorted in the sheds. As we gathered up the clothes and the things, each of us found something—food or something else. Some people found more, some less. We were allowed to keep the food. Usually the SS men didn't bother us. Anyway, the Germans were well aware that we were taking food that had been left in the undressing room. Before we moved to Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V], it was harder for us to lay hands on the food. That was unlike the Sonderkommando prisoners at Crematoria I [II] and II [III]. They lived there; all they had to do was put the food in the loft. We had to carry it all the way to the camp.

Do you remember any cases in which SS men confiscated the food for themselves?

That sort of thing hardly ever happened, except for canned food. In a few cases, the Kapo had to hand things to the SS when large quantities came, but they never took loose food.

Why not?

They were afraid. Some people in the transports had come from other camps where there'd been epidemics. Many members of the Sonderkommando died after they'd caught typhus, malaria, or other diseases. The Germans were aware of this and didn't want to get infected.

What did you do with the food that you didn't eat? Were you able to store it away and keep it?

Most of us had rucksacks that we took with us to work. We kept the food in them. We couldn't keep food in the barracks because the people on barrack room duty and the block elders took it for themselves or were ordered to throw it away.

Did you get the rucksacks from the Germans?

No, we found them among the things that people in the transports had brought. The people came with rucksacks, bags, and containers that we could use. Everyone took what he found suitable.

What about clothing? What did you wear?

We usually wore "civilian" clothes with red stripes that made us easier to identify. The stripes were on both sides and on the trousers. The jacket had one stripe on the side, breadthwise. It was usually forbidden to sew on a stripe. We put the stripes on with oil paint so they'd last and not fade. The shirts also had a stripe like that—a red stripe on the front and a cross on the back. The Kapo and the foreman wanted to make themselves look "elegant" so they wore

special clothes that were tailored to fit. Anyway, it was forbidden to wear one piece of clothing over another. We were allowed to wear only one layer of clothing. Once I found a young girl's woolen dress. I wore it like a sweater and that's how I didn't freeze.

How often did the Sonderkommando people get sick? What kind of care did the ill receive?

Many of them came down with typhus, hepatitis, and other serious illnesses. I think we'd got infected from food that the victims had brought from the camps, but we may have caught things from their clothing, too. If one of us got sick, a doctor came over, a professor from the University of Krakow, who examined him and wrote down his serial number. Two hours later, an "ambulance" with a Red Cross emblem came and took him away. But we knew that our sick friends would be put to death. They'd get an injection of phenol straight into the heart.

In fact, then, the ill received no care at all.

That's right. The only way you could really recover was in the barracks itself. We had infirmary rooms.[30] Our block also had a Jewish doctor who had come in a transport from France.[31] He was a very talented surgeon who performed urgent operations on the tables in our barracks, under very primitive conditions, of course. In Paris, he said, he'd had a one-hundred-bed private clinic. His wife was Christian. The Germans managed to murder her shortly before the liberation.

What care could the doctor provide for ill Sonderkommando prisoners, there in the barracks?

Practically speaking, he couldn't do much at all. Every few days he went to the camp infirmary and brought whatever medicines or bandages he could get there. But these were very simple materials, like paper bandages that looked like rolls of toilet paper, vaseline, etc. They didn't have real medicines there.

Was he the "official" doctor of the Sonderkommando?

Yes. He wasn't assigned to the cremation work. We set aside a little of our food for him. Once I said something to him in French and he replied, "You have a good French accent. I'll continue to teach you." I asked him how I'd learn a foreign language in a death camp, and he answered, "I'm still alive, but who knows what'll happen to me in ten minutes' time?"

Did you need medical care during your stay in the Sonderkommando?

I'd come down with typhus while I was with the partisans, so I was immune to it. But once I felt terrible pains in my leg. I went to our Kapo, Daniel, who some time later was shot by the SS in an escape attempt. He gave the barrack room duty man, Majorczyk, an instruction: "Majorczyk, he's staying in the block today. When we come back from work today, I want to find him here."

Since it was forbidden to stay in the barracks during working hours, Majorczyk hid me under one of the beds, under one of the planks, and said, "Lie here quietly until I tell you to come out!" A German doctor came to do an inspection. I lay there for a long time. Even long after the doctor went away, I didn't dare to breathe. Then I heard Majorczyk: "What, you're still lying there?" I answered, "I can't get out of here by myself." So one of the barrack room duty people grabbed me by one leg and dragged me out. That's how I survived. My cousin, who also suffered pains in his legs, was less fortunate. He was aching so badly that he couldn't put on his shoes and go to work. When we came back from work in the afternoon, he was no longer in the barracks. That was that. I think it was still in 1943.

You men weren't alone in the crematorium building. The Germans were always in close proximity. Can you describe your relations with the Germans around you?

We ordinary prisoners had no special relations or any connections with the Germans. The "officials" among us—the Kapo, the deputy Kapo, the foreman—were closer to them and developed some level of relations with the commanders and the others. They received their orders from the Germans. The Germans didn't give orders to simple prisoners. In fact, they had no contact with them at all. Orders were passed on to "officials" only. We received the Germans' orders via the Kapo or the foreman. Thus, our interaction with the Germans was rather limited, even when we did personal jobs for them.

I remember that once ten people from the Sonderkommando did some personal chores in the homes of Moll and Schultz, the ones in charge of the furnaces. A few of us did painting and repair work there. I cut grass with a scythe. Two SS men and a Kapo supervised us. They gave our orders to the Kapo only. They almost never spoke to us directly.

Do you remember the names of the Germans who worked at the crematorium?

The one who stood out most was *Oberscharführer* Moll. After him came *Scharführer* Fuchs,[32] who was in charge of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]. Later on, Fuchs was transferred to a concentration camp in the Sudetenland. Once he visited us and told us that there were 12,000 Jews in his camp, all of them morons. "If you went there," he said, "they'd tell you that you couldn't find a bigger bastard than me! The Jews there are stupid and don't know how to behave. That's why they don't have a thing and they aren't worth a thing. Me neither."

What did Fuchs mean by that?

He meant that the Jews there weren't cunning enough. If they'd manage to

pilfer things from the warehouses and barter them for food, he'd have come out ahead, too, and they would have been well fed. But things worked differently. Apart from Fuchs, there were two Germans: one worked at Crematorium II [III] and the other at Crematorium III [IV]. The first of them was a Kapo, an older man, a political prisoner. He had a red triangle painted on his clothes. The second one, Karol, was also a Kapo. He was a criminal who'd been convicted of rape in Germany. He had a black triangle painted on his clothes.[33] At the time of the Sonderkommando uprising, the rebels murdered him.

Can you describe the murder of Karol in greater detail?

Yes. We quarreled among ourselves about who'd be given the task of killing him. It was not only an easy task but also a great honor, because he was a scumbag. One comrade offered me half a liter of alcohol if I'd murder Karol. Another one said, "No way. I deserve it. Don't you remember how he almost beat me to death?" This man pulled out a knife that was lying in a watchmaker's toolbox that I'd found in the trash, grabbed the German Kapo in the corridor, and stabbed him so hard that the blade went right through his body and got stuck in the wall behind him. Afterwards, his body was thrown into the furnace. That was that.

When the Germans counted the living and the dead after the uprising, they realized that Karol wasn't there. They didn't find him anywhere. "Where is he?" they asked us. We said we didn't know a thing. Then one of the SS men had a suggestion, "Remove the ashes from the furnaces and then we'll see where he is." They found the keys to the crematorium in one of the furnaces. The Kapo always kept those keys in his pocket. That's how the Germans figured out that Karol had been thrown into the furnace and cremated.

Were those the only Germans who worked in the Sonderkommando?

Yes, they were the only ones. Apart from them, a few Poles and a few Russians worked in the crematoria.

What happened to the other German?

I don't remember the name of the other one, but he didn't survive either. He died in the middle of 1943, sick and old.[34]

What do you mean by "old"?

Back then, anybody who'd made it to sixty was considered very old.

Did they employ a sixty-year-old man as a Kapo there?

He was a political prisoner, one of many, and there were criminals there, too. We identified them by the black triangle. They released them from prisons and brought them to Auschwitz.

Were some SS men "better" than others?

No. Someone who treated you okay one day could be cruel and brutal the

next. Kind-heartedness wasn't one of the requirements of an SS man in a concentration camp. Each of them had his own inclinations, of course. There were SS men of different nationalities. Apart from Germans, there were Romanians, Lithuanians, and Dutch. I even have a fond memory of one SS man from Romania.

Once, we were ordered to haul coal from Crematorium I [II] to our crematorium, Crematorium IV [V]. They hitched us to a wagon like horses and made us load the coal onto the wagon. It was a rainy day. The ground was muddy and we could hardly move along. The Romanian SS man was riding in a car behind us. Since we were moving so slowly, he honked his horn relentlessly. The SS man who escorted us was totally indifferent. He should have been keeping an eye on us, so that we wouldn't escape or evade the work. When we moved to the side at a certain section of the road, the driver passed us and stopped. One of our men, said, "Brace yourselves, he's going to give it to us in a moment!" Suddenly, the driver got out of the car and asked, "Where do you have to take that cart?" Our cart was overloaded with coal. "To Crematorium IV [V]," we answered. "Hitch it to the car!" he replied. Then he turned to our Kapo and asked him to give him something in return for this rare service. The Kapo had a watch. He slipped the watch off his wrist and handed it to the Romanian, who said, "Everyone onto the cart. I'll tow it with my car."

Surely such a thing wasn't a daily occurrence, was it?

Definitely not. The fact that he didn't beat us and, what is more, even helped us, was truly something to celebrate.

Was the Kapo you mentioned Jewish?

Yes, but we also had two non-Jewish Polish Kapos, Wacek and Juzek.

How did the Polish Kapos treat the Jewish prisoners?

They were usually quite correct. There was only one incident with the foreman. One day, while we were in Crematorium III [IV], we found out that the Polish Kapos had gotten drunk and were beating up our comrades in Crematorium IV [V]. By the way, lots of Sonderkommando workers from Bezdin and Sosnowiec came to Crematorium IV [V].[35] Six of our men, including our Kapo, our foreman, and myself, went over there at once. Our Kapo wanted to speak with the Polish Kapo and our foreman spoke with the Polish foreman to calm him down: "Juzek, why are you beating these people?" Juzek answered crudely in Polish, "What do you care? Get out of here!" and waved his rod in the face of the Jewish foreman. The Kapo and the foreman were always armed with a rod. Suddenly I saw the foreman, Juzek, running toward me. He was a foreman, I was a simple prisoner. Well, as they said about Moses, "He turned this way and that, saw that there was no one, and struck the Egyptian." I didn't know what had come over me. Suddenly I was holding a brick. I leaped

onto the foreman, raised the stone, and hit him in the head. He was a little shorter than me, so I couldn't miss. Blood spurted from his head.

A Lithuanian SS man standing nearby saw the tussle. He jumped on me, screaming, "How dare you, a simple prisoner, beat up a foreman? That's mutiny!" He beat me with his stick on my hands and arms until I couldn't lift my arms anymore.

The next day I saw the Lithuanian SS man coming toward me. I changed direction because I was afraid that he'd beat me again. A few minutes later, when I was on the other side, I saw him next to me again. Again I moved away out of fear. Finally, he grabbed me again and said, "I'm sorry I beat you up yesterday, but it wasn't nice of you to hurt the foreman." I answered, "You're an SS man and I'm a simple prisoner. You can do whatever you want." Even though he was total scum, he thought it was right to apologize.

How did he react to your answer?

He said, "OK, very well . . ." as if to say, "Enough, let's drop it."

You often mentioned the "officials" but we haven't yet clarified their duties, the extent of their powers, and their obligations. What set Kapos and foremen apart from simple Sonderkommando workers?

First of all, they were excused from the work that we did. The Kapo was something like a foreman: he brought groups of workers—thirty or forty men—and divided up the tasks among them. The Kapo held overall responsibility for all the working groups; the foreman headed each group. He made sure that the group did its assigned work properly. When 100 or 120 Sonderkommando men went out to work, they were divided into six or seven groups. Each foreman was in charge of a group of about twenty men. Apart from these two officials, there was the deputy Kapo, who served as the Kapo's stand-in. The Kapo gave the working groups various messenger tasks.

What other "officials" were there? How would you characterize them?

The *Blockälteste* was also excused from the prisoners' regular work. He was given a separate little room at the front of the barracks. The barrack room duty man didn't work hard either. And they always had more food then everyone else. Apart from them, every barracks had a "block registrar" who took attendance in the barracks and at roll call, wrote up reports, and brought them to the person in charge.

Can you tell me more about your Kapo?

At first we had a Kapo named Daniel. He was one of the first people brought to Auschwitz, a status that gave a prisoner lots of extra privileges.[36] His serial number was 38000. Everyone knew him and knew how long he'd already been in the camp. Daniel had a reputation in Auschwitz. In France he'd been in the Foreign Legion. A healthy, strong guy. Everyone knew that anyone who'd

served in the Foreign Legion wasn't emotional or a softy. In fact, Daniel was not a French Jew. He'd come to France as a refugee. He was a Communist and he'd escaped from Poland to France.

Once I told him a personal anecdote. Back in Russia, I was considered an outstanding worker. The plant manager wanted me to join the Communist youth movement, the Komsomol. But I told him that I'd always been a member of Betar and couldn't join the Komsomol. He insisted: all outstanding workers in the plant have to join the Komsomol. Nothing helped; I had to join the Komsomol. Daniel liked that story and from then on he took me under his wing. After he wound up his term as a Kapo, he was promoted to the rank of foreman.[37] Eventually he was murdered in an escape attempt together with Majorczyk of Warsaw and two other Jews from France and Poland. I should also mention that Daniel once saved my life. Our next Kapo was a Jew from Ciechanow.[38] At first, we were bunkmates. Later on, when he was made Kapo, he treated me very badly.

In what way did he abuse you?

He'd order me in Yiddish to "Bück dich!" (bend over) and then he'd hit me with his stick. Once, after he hit me for no reason, I went to the barracks and burst into tears. Daniel asked me why I was crying. I told him that the Kapo was always hitting me for no reason. Daniel called the Kapo over and asked him what these beatings were for. He took off one of his wooden clogs, waved it in the Kapo's face, and said, "If he comes to me tomorrow and tells me that you touched him again, I'll hit you with this shoe." From that day on, that Kapo never laid a hand on me.

Did other things like this happen to you?

Yes. Once one of our groups was ordered to do some work, and the responsibility for it was assigned to the deputy Kapo, a really bad guy. He was notorious for harassing people, hitting them and injuring them until they bled. Nobody wanted to be in his labor detail. All the prisoners who were drafted into his detail went into hiding. But since the deputy Kapo needed a certain number of men and was far short of the required number, he pulled out a few of the Greek Jews just as we were going out to work. I asked him why he was taking them, since they didn't belong to his detail. I wanted him to find other people. He answered that it was none of my business. As we began to argue, an SS man suddenly appeared in front of us to take our squad out to work. How dare you fight with a deputy Kapo, he asked me. Then he handed his baton to the deputy Kapo so that he could beat me. He hit me five or ten times, I don't remember how many. I had to lean over a wooden bench to receive the blows. When I straightened up, the SS man said to me, "Now you take the baton, the deputy Kapo will lean over the bench, and you hit him!"

This deputy Kapo almost dragged me into a shady deal. He came to me once and suggested that we escape together. He said he could "organize" papers for us. He also had an insider who could help us. All I had to do was help him get some valuables in order to bribe people who could assist us. I agreed, hesitantly.

One day he came over and said that we'd go and meet the SS man who'd "organize" the papers for us. The whole deal seemed fishy to me. At the crematorium I had a friend named Kalman Fuhrmann, whom I'd known since I was a kid. We'd been schoolmates. I contacted him and told him that it would be hard for me to come to work that day. I asked him to take my place so he could keep an eye on what was happening there. If they needed him, I'd replace him. Kalman went to work and told me on the way back that it was a good thing I hadn't come. The whole forest was full of SS men. I realized that the SS men had found out about the escape and wanted to catch us. When the deputy Kapo realized that I wasn't with him and that I'd sent another worker in my place, he stopped speaking with me. I also totally ignored him.

What happened to Kalman Fuhrmann?

One day he didn't appear in the squad. The sealed black car that they used to haul bodies had come for him, too. It drove him straight to the crematorium. Our block elder had been an international criminal before the war. He'd robbed train passengers. I don't remember his name. After the war, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison. I told my friends that I'd kill him.

Was there a large turnover among the Sonderkommando prisoners?

Our ranks were always being depleted by diseases and epidemics. When that happened, they filled the ranks with new Sonderkommando prisoners. A Dutch Jew who'd came to us had an especially tragic experience.[39]

How so?

The Dutch Jews weren't used to the harsh conditions of Auschwitz. For Jews from Poland and Russia like ourselves, it was totally different. The Dutch were fragile and weak. They didn't last long under the conditions of Auschwitz. When a transport from Holland came, I found thin sandwiches among their possessions, dainty slices like the sort that are served on airplanes. We hadn't been raised that way; our people baked big round loaves of bread that weighed six to eight kilograms. We broke them into chunks that we ate right away.

Only one of the fifty Sonderkommando prisoners from Holland survived. The rest were overwhelmed by the shock that hit them. Bear in mind that whenever the Sonderkommando was short of working hands, they didn't replenish our ranks with camp prisoners, who'd already been there for some time, but only from newly arrived transports. You see, we, too, had been taken

straight from the transport to the Sonderkommando. We spent only one day in the camp and were placed with the Sonderkommando right away. Later on, when the ranks thinned out again and the transports came from Greece, these Jews were taken straight from the Birkenau train station to the Sonderkommando. They didn't give the people time to get used to the camp; instead, they threw them straight into hell. They were taken directly to the Sonderkommando without knowing where they were, without preparation, and without prior notice about where they were heading. Straight from the transport to the Sonderkommando.

Were all the Jews in your barracks from the same geographic area?

In our group, there were Jews from all kinds of places in Poland—Grodno, Mlawa,[40] Plonsk,[41] Sosnowiec—and from other countries too: from Greece, and even a Jew named Maurice from Algeria, a real savage.

How did you speak with the Jews who had come from other countries?

The Greek Jews spoke French and Ladino. I spoke French with them. Most of our people spoke Yiddish. The Greeks, as I said, spoke French, and people from France who'd learned a little Yiddish served as interpreters. After the Warsaw ghetto uprising was put down, some of the Greek Jews in the Sonderkommando were forced to destroy the ghetto buildings and to gather up belongings in the ruins.[42] They used Greek Jews for this work, and not Polish Jews, because Polish Jews might make contact with other Jews who were in hiding.

Can you tell me something about relations among you?

The groups that worked in the crematoria were kept apart and there was hardly any contact between them. We formed groups with other people from the same country of origin: Jews from Poland, Lithuania, Slovakia. How long you'd been in the camp was very important. The people who'd been there the longest were the Jews of Brno.[43] They had numbers like 42000 or 24000. They'd been working in the Sonderkommando since the time of the first crematorium, back in the main camp, Auschwitz. They'd been transferred to Birkenau later on.

There was a group of Jews from France that was really made up of Communist Jews from Poland who'd escaped to France. We called them "Frenchmen" even though they were from Poland. There were Jews from Hungary and Jews from Grodno who'd been in my transport. Very few of them survived. The Sonderkommando was a mixed collection of people from all parts of Europe and northern Africa. They'd come from a broad spectrum of places. Each man came from a different town.

We Lithuanian Jews formed a group of thirty men and instilled fear in the rest of the prisoners. They were all afraid of us because we adopted the slogan

"All for one and one for all" as our code of behavior. It was known that anyone who hurt us would be punished. I'll give you an example: I already mentioned Maurice, the Jew from Algeria. The Germans appointed him and a Jew from Slovakia to be hangmen. They raided villages and towns to carry out executions. Maurice had a solid physique; he was very strong and healthy. Once he beat up one of our friends, one of the Lithuanians. He had no idea what awaited him. We all pounced on him and beat the hell out of him. We wanted to punish him for having beaten up one of our friends. Three members of our group were brothers, jewelers from Nowy Dwor.[44] One of them picked up a pair of pliers, the kind that jewelers use, and ran toward Maurice to smash his skull in. I stopped him and shouted, "Have you lost your mind? You'll kill him!" Afterwards they brought Maurice to the barracks and poured water on him to bring him round. The doctor from France took care of him. We told him not to give Maurice a bandage; if he'd done that, the SS men would have gone crazy.

That evening I wanted to bring Maurice some tea and ask him how he was. One of my friends in the Sonderkommando told me, "Don't go there. He'll kill you." I answered, "He won't kill me anymore. I'm not afraid." I went to him and asked, "Maurice, would you like something to drink?" He answered quietly, in a patois of Polish, German, and Yiddish, "Me no. . . ."

Once the Germans wanted to hang some Poles who'd mutinied against them. They told us to appoint two men for the task but none of us volunteered —except for Maurice and a Jew from Slovakia. They went because they knew they'd get good food and better conditions for doing so.

Did the two of them return to the camp?

No, they didn't return. We heard that they were shot like dogs after the hanging. Polish civilians who worked nearby told us about it.

Can you remember the names of a few of your workmates in the Sonderkommando?

Kalman Fuhrmann, Zalman Rochkin, Nissan Lewin, Berl Becker. Nissan Lewin, who was much older than me, came from my hometown. He and his brother-in-law were both in the Sonderkommando. He was a strong, healthy man who could easily hoist two eighty-kilo sacks of flour onto his shoulders and haul them the first floor. I was told that he died a few weeks before the liberation.

Who was your best friend among the Sonderkommando prisoners?

I had lots of friends there. For some time, I was in a group of six good friends. We divided up all the food that we'd acquired. To maintain a friendship like that, you had to trust one another. There was no room for liars in a

group like that. We worked in various labor squads. If any of us could smuggle a little food into the barracks, we divided it up equally.

Did all of you come from one community?

No, not at all.

Please describe additional Sonderkommando prisoners whom you remember in particular.

One of the Jews of Athens who'd come to Auschwitz was a short man whom we called Piccolo. Since he was well educated, even the Kapo treated him considerately. The Athenian Jews were the last of the Greek Jews to arrive. The Germans deported the Jews of Salonika first. The Jews of Athens were quite different from them.

Why was this Jew called Piccolo?

He was very sensitive and he took care of the bodies of murdered children only. He'd evidently been a teacher or a writer. He looked for children's bodies only; he went into the gas chambers, and pulled out their bodies. In our jargon, a baby was called a piccolo and that became this Jew's nickname. We always called him Piccolo. No one knew his real name. He'd pick up the bodies and carry them to the pit or the furnace.

There was another man who tried to be entertaining and funny even in that place. He always spoke in a sarcastic or macabre way. For example, he said that the gas chambers at the crematorium were like a movie. The pictures flashed by until the word "Ende" [The End] came up on the blank screen. That's how we lived, too: we ran to the gas chambers, took the bodies out, ripped out their gold teeth, hacked off their hair, took them away for cremation, removed the ashes—and then the word "Ende" appeared.

While we're on the subject of tragicomedy, I'd also like to tell you about the man whom we called "Kondomierz." He was from somewhere near Lomza.[45] His real name was Monyek. He used to hunt for condoms in the mounds of trash that were waiting for incineration, and that's where he got his nickname. When we needed him, we called for Kondomierz. Whenever he found a condom, he inflated it like a balloon and played with it like a little boy.

Another interesting man was the artist David Olère.[46] He drew caricatures with just a few simple lines but created people who were full of the spirit of life anyway. I still remember something that Olère did especially for us. When we found a watch among the murdered people's belongings, we gave it to him and he wrote on it "Doxa" or the name of some other famous manufacturer, so that we could barter it. It was a sophisticated forgery, and to produce it he used a magnifying glass that he'd found among the things.

Really, each of us had a personal fad of some kind. I collected medicines and

had a whole suitcase full of them. When the doctor in the barracks needed medicine, he searched for it in my suitcase. I knew what some of the medicines were for and had no idea about others. The doctor often looked there for what he wanted and sometimes found it. The Dutch Jews brought lots of medicine to the camp. I remember a preparation called "D-Vitamin 5" that the Dutch Jews brought. It contained five vitamins. I took it myself.

Where did you find these medicines?

I found them in Crematorium III [IV] in the garbage that was going to be incinerated. In the yard of the crematorium was a large pit, where they brought all these things and documents from "Kanada" that couldn't be used. After the initial sorting in "Kanada," everything that was considered surplus to requirements was loaded onto a truck and taken away for incineration. All of us rummaged through it. That's where I found the watchmaker's toolbox that I mentioned. I used the knives and the little saws in it to make monograms that I sold to the block elders, the foremen, and the Kapos. After word of my handicraft skills spread, more people came to me and I made monograms for them, too. In this fashion I received half a loaf of bread from someone, a wedge of cheese from someone else, and chunks of sausage from someone else.

Were victims' photo albums among the items that were thrown into the incineration pit?

There were photo albums, too, but no one took an interest in them. We didn't know the people in the pictures and the albums themselves were valueless to us. As a curiosity, I can tell you that after transports came from France we sometimes found pornography in the mountains of trash. Yes, we took those magazines to the barracks. We looked at them and it was like a real festival.

It's rather strange that Jews brought magazines like that to the camp . . .

They did it because they all thought they were going to a labor camp. Who among them had any idea that they weren't going to work but to a gas chamber? That's how the Germans tormented us. The Jews believed the Germans' lies. You can tell how effectively the Germans managed to fool the Jews by all the things that the Jews, and not only the French Jews, brought to Auschwitz.

Right now I remember how one French Jewish woman brought a little poodle. When they gave it pieces of meat, the dog didn't bite into them but just licked them. It was used to eating nothing but the finest delicacies.

Was the poodle brought to you at the crematorium?

No, the SS men took the poodle and kept it. I think it was Fuchs who gave the order to take it.

Did you know the Sonderkommando men who kept secret diaries?

Yes, I knew a few of them. I knew the "Maggid of Makow."[47] He'd been a

preacher, a teller of parables, in the synagogue. At first he worked at Bunker I and later on, when we worked in the crematoriums, he came to Crematorium II [III] and worked for Gradowski, whose wife was from Makow. He boasted about how he kept kosher even though the food in the camp didn't meet the requirements. We weren't given meat, let alone pork. For Passover 1944, after our conditions improved slightly, one of us bribed one of the workers in charge of the mess—most of the mess workers were Soviet prisoners of war—to give us a little flour. We wanted to bake matzo so that the "Maggid of Makow" could conduct a seder. I made a cogwheel to punch holes in the matzo dough. At night we turned on the stove in the barracks and that's how we baked the matzo. We weren't afraid because we were already veterans. We didn't have any wine, so the Maggid—I still remember this very well—said, "Let's recite the blessing over tea."

Did the Maggid have to do the same work as the other Sonderkommando prisoners?

We tried to be considerate toward him. On festival days, the Kapo, who was also from the vicinity of Makow, gave him easy work or make-believe work. The idea was to keep the Germans from suspecting him of being idle and to spare him the really backbreaking work. On regular weekdays, he dragged bodies at our crematorium.

You mentioned Gradowski. Please tell me about him.

Zalman Gradowski was from Suwalki. He'd married a woman from my hometown, Lunna. Her father had a grocery and stationery shop that sold everything. After the war broke out, Suwalki fell to the Germans. The family made its way to Lunna. When the German occupation began, a ghetto was established there and Gradowski was put in charge of health affairs there. In Birkenau, he and the Maggid of Makow kept diaries at night and wrote down everything that happened: where the transports came from, how many people arrived, when each transport arrived, how many were murdered, and how many came as prisoners. They concealed their writings in bottles that they'd found in the trash. They sealed the bottles with wax so the writings would keep until the Germans were defeated. We knew we had to keep every bit of wax that we found in the trash and bring it to the Maggid or to Gradowski, so they could use it to seal the bottles where they'd placed the writings.[48]

Did you ever have an opportunity to hold intellectual conversations with the Maggid or with Gradowski?

What on earth could we have talked about? Each of us had his own concerns and tragedies to live with. Almost everyone there was the only surviving member of his family. Like me. In exceptional cases, two brothers from one family were still alive. It was also a matter of luck. I knew three brothers from

Janowka and the two Dragon brothers, Shlomo and Abraham. Abraham was the older of them. He was shot in the leg during the Sonderkommando uprising. They brought him to the Auschwitz infirmary,[49] where he stayed until he got better. When we set out on the death march, we "organized" a wagon, placed him in it, and towed it. His brother Shlomo managed to escape during the death march.

As for your question, among us was a guy named Shloime De-Geller, a blond-haired lawyer from Wolkowisk.[50] His wife was also from my hometown, Lunna. He and two of his brothers-in-law served in the Sonderkommando together. All three of them worked with us. Sometimes they held lengthy conversations on various topics. They were interesting conversations, and occasionally I took part in them, too.

One evening, as we sat together, American aircraft flew over the camp on their way to a bombing raid in the vicinity of Gleiwitz.[51] Smoke was still billowing from the smokestacks of the crematoria, and we said, "If only those planes would drop a few bombs on the crematoria of Birkenau this time." We hoped so badly that it would happen. We didn't know what was going on at the front, of course. We didn't have newspapers, didn't have a radio. In a few matters, we argued about how we should behave.

One day a truck delivered some women from the camp to the crematoria. They were sick *Muselmänninnen* [female *Muselmänner*] who really were half-dead. They couldn't be put to work anymore. So the Germans decided to murder them in the gas chambers. One girl who could still stand up and speak turned to a Sonderkommando man named Yankl, a tall, strong guy, grasped his hand, and said, "I'm eighteen and I've never slept with a man. Do me a favor: I want to have this experience once before I die. Can you do me this favor before I die?" Yankl pushed her away and went into hiding so she wouldn't ask him again. He felt that he couldn't do what she'd asked and if he'd done it, it would have been morally wrong.

When he told us about it, we held an open discussion about whether he'd done the right thing by refusing her last request or whether he should have done it. Opinions were divided and the debate was very heated. Yankl said, "You're out of your minds! She was a *Muselmännin,* filthy and covered with shit. What is more, I knew that they were taking her to the gas chamber! Who could even think of such a thing then?"

Those were the kinds of cases we discussed. Most of the members thought that Yankl did the right thing when he refused to do what the girl had asked, conditions being what they were.

Do you remember cases of solidarity and mutual assistance in relations among you?

Yes, I remember them well; there were many cases like that. For example, when many of us came down with malaria. Those who contracted malaria weren't allowed to eat fatty foods. They had to keep to a strict diet and eat healthy food. We didn't have lots of that. Whenever one of us got sick, we made an effort to get him the things he needed. We went about it in all kinds of ways. When we had potatoes, we put them aside for him. We did the same with pearl barley, which was essential for people with malaria. Even when we were hungry, we thought first about those of us who were sick. Quinine works very well against malaria, and I often managed to get my hands on it for the malaria patients. Once one of us in the Sonderkommando, a young guy from Wola, not far from my hometown, got sick. I gave him quinine, which I happened to have at the time.

Were there non-Jews in the Sonderkommando? Can you remember any of them?

Apart from the two Germans whom we've already discussed, I remember four Poles and three Russians who were in the Sonderkommando. They slept in different barracks. One Pole worked at Crematorium III [IV]. He came from a town somewhere near Auschwitz. His number was 1200. He was one of the very first prisoners. He'd been sentenced to five or ten years and was about to be released. He was even allowed to shampoo his hair. In the end they took him to Auschwitz for a checkup and killed him. When his body was delivered to us for cremation, his face was totally twisted out of shape. The Germans didn't want us to recognize him.

How did you know that it was him?

We recognized him by his physique.

Do you remember his name?

His name was Juzek. We had three men of that name. One worked at Crematorium III [IV]; the second one worked with Jacek at Crematoria I [II] and II [III]. Later on, two of them came to Crematorium IV [V]. There was another Pole named Juzek, who was from Warsaw. He was a foreman. His face was all scarred because of smallpox. All three were friends. Only the fourth didn't join their group.

What happened to the Russians who worked with you?

The Russians worked with us for a very short time only, because they were murdered. I don't remember exactly where they came from, maybe also from Auschwitz.[52] When the four women[53] who gave us the explosives were caught, the Russians were suspected of having collaborated with us.

Among the Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners, were there any who'd been brought to the camp from prisons where they'd been incarcerated?

Yes, but they weren't "criminals" in the ordinary sense of the word. They

were Jews who'd violated the Germans' regulations against the Jewish population, like the prohibition against moving from town to town. Anyone who got caught in an infraction was imprisoned. In most cases, these Jews were taken from the prison straight to Auschwitz.

Women were never employed in the Sonderkommando, were they?

No, women didn't work with us.

Severe epidemics were common among the camp prisoners. Were you men also plagued by epidemics and contagious diseases?

Yes. There were people in the Sonderkommando who died of diseases and epidemics, like typhus or hepatitis. Hepatitis was especially common. Many of us died from hepatitis and other diseases.

Did you know, while you were in the camp, about the murder of previous Sonderkommando men?

The Germans murdered some of our people on occasion, but the great extermination actions took place before I'd reached Auschwitz. We knew our lives hung by a thread. We had no illusions. We lived with the awareness that our chances of survival were not especially great. But a man never loses hope of surviving. It's a fact that those who came to the Sonderkommando in late 1942 did survive.

Were you ever in immediate mortal danger?

Yes. In 1944 they took out a group of fifty men to cut down trees in the vicinity of Katowice. We were supervised by ten SS men with dogs. I was sure they did it to provoke us into trying to escape or violating orders[54]—something that would give them an excuse to kill the whole group. In fact, the idea of escaping was definitely on our minds, but every time it came up, we wanted to check out the situation. In this particular case, we didn't have a chance. We couldn't do a thing against ten armed men and we were helpless against those terrifying dogs. The dogs frightened us more than the SS men did. They didn't bite the way dogs normally do. They'd been trained to rip people to shreds. They could tear a person apart chunk by chunk. If a dog like that got you by the leg, you lost all power to resist. We also had to consider the fact that we were in enemy territory where no one would help us. We had no chance at all. Any resistance on our part would have been just like suicide.

If somebody wanted to end his life, it was easier to climb on the electric fence and get it over with. It was also easier to kill an SS man, since you'd get a bullet right away—over and done with. We usually examined possibilities of escape calmly and in a matter-of-fact way. We never acted impulsively, without weighing up the situation. After a year and a half in the camp, after I'd gone through all phases of the crisis, I was able to analyze any situation quietly and

seriously and weigh up all the possibilities and drawbacks, risks and chances, in order to make level-headed, smart decisions.

Do you remember any acts of resistance or mutiny by Sonderkommando men during your tenure?

I'll tell you about an exceptional event that many of us still remember. Five Jewish Sonderkommando prisoners—two from Athens and three from Poland—organized for action. They were guarded by two SS men, one of whom was the Lithuanian who'd hit me. Together with them they went out of the camp to dump the barrels of ashes of murdered people into the river. Apparently, their decision to seize the moment and escape while they were outside the camp, under relatively light guard, was spontaneous.

Ashes were thrown into the river in the following way: they were dumped from the truck a short distance from the water, and there was a residue that landed on the riverbank. The Germans wanted to get rid of the evidence of the residue. So the prisoners were ordered to clean the riverbank of whatever remained of the ashes. The two Greek Jews hoped that the three Polish Jews would join them. One of them picked up a hoe and hit one of the SS men over the head. The SS man fell to the ground. They threw the second one into the water and hoped that he'd drown. In the meantime, the first SS man came to. The Polish Jews didn't help the Greeks. They stood aside and didn't lift a finger. They were helpless. When one of the Greek Jews noticed this, he left the SS man in the water alone and began to swim with his friend towards the opposite bank. But since they couldn't speak Polish and didn't know anyone in the area, they were captured and executed.

Can you add some details about these Greek Sonderkommando prisoners who were captured after their escape?

Definitely. One of them had been an officer in the Greek army. I can still picture that strong, healthy guy. Once I was standing next to the smokestack of the building and he grabbed me by both hands and picked me up like a feather. The other one had been an officer in the Greek navy.

What eventually became of the two of them?

They brought the bodies to us; we had to cremate them.

What happened to the three Polish Jews?

Two of them survived. One of them was named Arcik (Aharon) Lubowicz. He eventually got to Bnei Brak [in Israel] and emigrated to Canada later on. He's dead now.

Let's talk about the Sonderkommando uprising. How did the whole incident begin?

One day in October 1944, a few days before the uprising began, the Ger-

mans came and announced that there'd be a roll call. They needed several dozen workers for "outside labor." When they saw that no one was volunteering for the task, they tried to choose people on the basis of certain occupations, such as cobblers, carpenters, and electricians. The German who did the roll call called out, "Electricians, step forward!" I'd made up my mind to ignore the order. He searched among the ranks and finally found me. He added me to the group, thirty men in all.

As soon as the German turned around, I returned to the ranks. He noticed that I wasn't in the group anymore, looked for me, and found me in the group where I'd been standing at the roll call. He punished me for trying to evade the work; he kicked me real hard in my lower back. Afterwards, he ordered an SS man to guard me. They took us to a room that was fenced in. We were totally isolated. I sat down next to a smokestack and hummed a song. I was totally indifferent. I braced myself for what was to come, since I was sure we were going to board a transport that would take us to death. As I already noted, the selection of these thirty men took place shortly before the uprising broke out. The uprising in Crematorium III [IV] began after they transferred us from Crematorium III [IV] to Crematorium IV [V]. A few men from the Sonderkommando set the building on fire.

Do you remember the names of the Sonderkommando men who torched the building?

The chief arsonist was a man from Bedzin named Yosl. I don't remember his last name. For the most part, we didn't know our friends' last names. It was Yosl who started the fire. Apparently they first set fire to the bunks and the mattresses in the loft where the Sonderkommando prisoners lived. That was the signal for the start of the uprising.

Did you men get any outside assistance in planning and carrying out the uprising?

There was a dialogue of sorts with the Polish partisans.[55] They demanded huge sums of money for their resistance operations. In return, they promised us military aid.

Where did the Sonderkommando prisoners raise the money?

We got the money from workers in the property warehouse.[56] As they sorted things, they sometimes found valuables in the clothing—dollars, gold coins, rings, etc.

Can you describe the preparations for the uprising?

We began to prepare for the uprising half a year before it began. We produced homemade mines and hand grenades. We got the explosives from the Jewish women who worked in the munitions plant.

What did the hand grenades look like?

We took square metal cans of food, filled them with explosives, and put in fuses. We added bits of metal that we made from the barbed wire fences. We wanted the hand grenades to scatter as much shrapnel as possible when they exploded, in order to injure lots of people. The women put the explosives in a place that we worked out in advance, and from there they were taken by the *Scheisskommando* people.[57] They passed by the barracks with a cart that they used to haul their tools. They towed these carts or trolleys with ropes. They concealed the explosives between the strands of the ropes because they were sure the Germans wouldn't search there. As they passed next to me with the cart, I noticed that the strands were slack and the prisoners weren't holding them tightly.

Eliezer, did you take part in making the hand grenades?

Yes, I belonged to that group. I also took part in making other weapons, knives of sorts. The Jews had brought knives to the camp to make kiddush. Their original purpose was to slice the challah. They had the words *Le-shabbat kodesh,* for the Holy Sabbath, engraved on them. They were long and had white handles. My job was to make them into bayonets by honing them on all four sides. During the uprising, they used these knives in Crematorium II [III] to kill the Kapo Karol.

The basic precondition for a successful uprising was to keep silent about it. Only a small group knew about it. The head of our underground movement was a Russian Jewish major from the artillery corps who'd been taken prisoner in the battle of Stalingrad. He was a typical underground fighter. There were three Russian Jews in addition to him. He said, "There are eighty thousand prisoners in the camp. Even if the Germans shoot half of them, forty thousand will survive. That's a horde. These people have nothing to lose." We were told that the uprising would begin. Then, as it turned out, the Polish resistance fighters demanded that we postpone the uprising.

When did you find out about this demand?

I think it was in August 1944. The Russian officer said, "It doesn't matter whether they join or not; we're going ahead." According to the original plan, the uprising in Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] was supposed to begin then. Two carts were supposed to come then; they'd originally been used to haul coal or bodies, I don't remember exactly. We were supposed to grab the weapons from the dead SS men and then move forward in these carts. Apparently the Poles who worked at the crematorium leaked the plan.

What was the sequence of events on the day of the uprising?

After the selection was over and the thirty men had been chosen, they wanted to transport the rest of them out of there. But they resisted, set the crematorium building on fire, and began to shoot. There were two Jewish

doctors in my group. I wanted to move to Crematorium III with them. An SS man who stood at the gate prevented us from doing it. One of the doctors fell to the ground and died then and there. I asked the second doctor what it was all about, and then I figured out that he'd injected himself with poison. The second doctor had also swallowed some poison pills and spent the next three days in his death throes. He looked foggy as I talked with him, since he'd already managed to take the pills.

Most of the Sonderkommando workers who took part in the uprising were murdered. We were locked up and kept in isolation all that time. The building of Crematorium III [IV] was almost totally burned down. The building had a wooden roof that caught fire easily. Some of the beams of the building were also made of wood, and so were the bunks, of course. All that remained of the building were the stone walls and the smokestacks. When the men in Crematorium I saw the fire, they realized that the uprising had begun and they also went into action. They killed Karol, tried to set the building on fire, and began to escape. It was easier to escape from there because the building bordered the outer fence of the camp. A few of them were able to jump over the fence. Eventually, however, all of them were caught. We were locked up there for half a day. By then the uprising had died down and they made us cremate the bodies. That was the only work left to do, since no new transports of European Jews arrived anymore. Finally, the Jewish women who had helped us were hanged.

Did you witness this personally?

Only from a distance, since the executions took place in the women's camp.[58] The exit barrier in the camp was lowered and we weren't allowed to circulate freely. We could view the terrible scene secretly, from the barracks, because the block elder posted guards to keep us from going out. We had the guts to ignore the prohibition; we were full of self-confidence just then.

After the women were caught, they called me over from the crematorium and ordered me to tell them which other women belonged to the underground. They threatened to shoot me on the spot or throw me into the furnace alive. I said I didn't know a thing and they left me alone. I went back to the barracks pale with fear. My hair went white over night, and I was just twenty-three years old.[59]

The evacuation of Auschwitz-Birkenau began on January 18, 1945. Was there any prior indication that this would happen?

Yes. The first time I noticed something strange was when I was wandering around the camp one day and saw some friends who were very busy. I asked them what they were getting ready to do, and they said they were about to break into the food warehouse. I told them I wanted to take part, since I had

suitable tools for a break-in in my possession. It was the first time during my stay as a prisoner in Auschwitz that I became aware of the electric fence that surrounded the camp. With the help of a friend, I cut the barbed wire so that we could move into Camp F,[60] where Jewish women from my hometown were living. The moment we cut the fence, it created a short circuit. We knew that the Germans at their watch stations could determine exactly where the short circuit was and that they could come quickly to fix it. Therefore, we had to cut the fence in such a way that the Germans wouldn't be able to figure out where the short circuit was. So the two of us stood there with wire cutters, each of us grasping a different end of the wire. We cut the fence and threw the section that we'd cut away to the side. Thus, the electrical current was stopped, the fence couldn't electrocute anyone anymore, but no short circuit was created. All of this know-how was crucial at the time. Then we broke into the food warehouse. I grabbed loaves of bread and stuffed a few packs of margarine in my pockets. I took as much as I could, because the moment we broke in many others came to stock up on food. I gave the food that I took to women from my hometown. The barbed wire of the electric fence was vertical and horizontal. If we hadn't cut the fence, we couldn't have moved the food past the fence.

That night they took us from Birkenau to Auschwitz and put us in barracks. We searched for food there, too, but someone had beaten us to it. Just the same, I found a cardboard box with twenty-four packages of meat. We sat up half the night, the Sonderkommando men, and gorged ourselves.

Wasn't that bad for your health? In similar cases, prisoners paid dearly for the sudden overeating.

Absolutely not. We poured out the fat and the water. We ate only the meat. It was probably horsemeat but we didn't care. Each of us kept a package for the road. They counted us again in the morning, and then a group of five thousand people set out from the camp. We walked a long, long way.[61]

Bodies were strewn on the side of the road. We walked about twenty kilometers, as far as Pszczyna.[62] There we were held for a few hours on a soccer field. Afterwards, we continued to march. We spent the night on a farm and had to carry on in the morning. On the way, we passed next to a railroad station where the cars were already waiting for us. We climbed aboard the cars, because they wanted to take us to Germany. As we were being packed into the cars, my friend and I found an opportunity to escape. The guards shot at us as we fled and my friend was killed. I took a bullet in the leg but I continued to run. I found a hideout behind a forested hill nearby.

When I was in the Betar movement, we practiced how to hide and we learned that the right way is to leave footprints backwards. So I had to walk backwards. As the SS men chased me, they saw the footprints that I'd left and

deduced that I'd come down from the hill. So they turned around. I was able to watch them from above as I hid in the trees. That trick saved my life.

The wound in my leg and the lack of medical care made my toes freeze. I had to operate on myself and I cut away flesh and blood vessels with nail scissors. Eventually everything rotted away and only the bones were left.

What did you do after the danger passed?

I ran toward some mortar fire that I'd heard, but I misjudged it. I ran through the forest all that night. I slept the next night because I was absolutely spent. I wasn't interested in living. My strength was totally sapped. But if it was my fate to die, I knew that I was running to death as a free man.

I found a hiding place in some dried reeds next to a pond. I made a mattress out of the reeds and went to sleep on it. When I woke up, all my limbs were frozen. I ran toward a village; I thought that I'd reached Pszczyna unwittingly. I approached a house where a woman was standing at the door. I turned to the woman and said, "Give me something to drink." She answered, "What would you like? Coffee?" And she invited me in.

I sat down and she brought me some coffee and even a slice of bread. Then her husband appeared and demanded to know who I was. "What do you care who I am?" I answered dryly. "After I'm done, I'll go away." The man insisted: "I want to know who you are." I was afraid of getting arrested again, so I answered in a make-believe tone of indifference, "Do you really want to know? I escaped from a transport to Auschwitz. I'm one of the prisoners of Auschwitz."

Not far from the house, as I found out later on, was the road taken by the prisoners on the death march. The road was still full of bodies. The man asked, "Where are you heading?" "I don't know." "Do you know anyone around here?" he asked. "No," I answered. "So stay with us." I stayed with these Christian Poles for at least five weeks, until Soviet soldiers liberated the area. Then they put me in the hospital for initial treatment.

Who was that Pole who put you up in his home and saved you?

His name was Augustin Tendera and his wife was Franciska. They had a son named Ignac and two daughters, Malgorzata and Marta.

What was the name of the village?

Radostowice.

Are you still in touch with the family?

Yes, I've visited them twice. The last time was in September 1993, when I visited Poland to film the documentary about the Sonderkommando men. The family came to the film set in Birkenau to visit me. Obviously, I've corresponded with them all the time. I've sent them gifts and did so when I visited them, too. I sent them parcels with all sorts of nice things, mainly for festivals. That's all I can give them, but they deserve a lot more. After all, they saved my life.[63]

6

Shaul Chazan: "Life Didn't Matter Anymore, Death Was Too Close"

Shaul Chazan has a strong presence and projects an impressive personality. His large eyes sparkle with vitality. He is an offspring of the proud Jewish community of Salonika and a loyal, dyed-in-the-wool Zionist. He did not allow any of my interviews with him to pass without reiterating his conviction that the Holocaust could not have happened had the Jews had a state to protect them. "Without a state, we are easy prey for extermination." He always backed up this statement of principle with a story about two SS men who visited the furnace compound at Birkenau one day. One of them whispered to the other, "Look at these Jews; it's happening to them only because they don't have a state of their own."

Shaul Chazan lives in Holon, a suburb of Tel Aviv. We first met in 1987, when I had begun to document the fate of the Jews in Salonika in Auschwitz-Birkenau. We traveled together with a group of Holocaust survivors from Salonika to Greece and Poland, and our purpose was to prepare a broadcast for Holocaust Martyrs and Heroes Remembrance Day on Israel Army Radio. It was Shaul's first visit to Poland after the Holocaust. When we reached the ruins of Crematorium II [III],[1] where he had worked, it seemed as though time had stood still for the forty-three years that had elapsed.

Shaul walked directly toward what had once been the building, pointed to each and every wing, and recounted the events that had taken place in each

location: "Here was the room where the people undressed, here was the door to the gas chamber, here was the gas chamber itself, and here I removed the bodies from the gas chamber." I turned pale from shock. It was as though he had left this place only yesterday.

The most moving part of the visit for me, however—an experience that brought me to tears—was a remark that Shaul made after one of the recording sessions. "Gideon," he said as we walked slowly from the ruins of Crematorium II [III] to the yard of the crematorium, the microphone still on, "something that has been bottled up inside me for more than forty years has just been purged. To this day, I haven't told anyone in my family a thing about my life during the Holocaust. I just couldn't tell them about my work in Birkenau. Now I feel released. The shackles that bound my heart have been untied. Thank you for doing this for me."

I was delighted to hear this. My conscience troubles me when I lead Holocaust survivors back into their past, their bitter memories, their nightmares, everything that they have been trying to repress and gag in order to make their lives in the present tolerable. Shaul's words showed me that the journey to the past also has a positive effect—catharsis from the painful and cumulative burden that people like him have been carrying for years.

Over the next few months, Shaul told me that after he had returned from our trip together he had told his children about his tenure in Auschwitz for the first time. His burden of memories of Auschwitz was no longer as onerous as it had been.

I interviewed Chazan in Hebrew, a language that he had never really mastered. He gave his testimony in simple terms, but then again, the characteristics that I had discovered in him—inner power, sincerity, credibility, and honesty—do not need lofty rhetoric. He never tried to prettify the ghastly reality, never sought justifications or excuses, never placed himself at the forefront, and never portrayed himself as a hero or as a person with special credentials. Even when he described horrors—the gas, the furnaces, the ashes, the inconceivable suffering—he spoke simply and always did so in a gentle, restrained tone of voice.

In addition to his other fine character traits, Shaul had the ability to disconnect from Auschwitz swiftly and return to daily life. When we visited Josef Sackar together, Shaul and Josef poured themselves little cups of wine, sipped contentedly, and enjoyed the home refreshments as I conducted the interviews and as the conversation turned to the Holocaust. They were simply happy with their lot. This, they explained, was their great victory over Hitler, a bit of consolation amidst the tumult.

Whenever I contemplate Shaul Chazan, a man who represents the Jewish

community of Salonika so well, I grasp the enormity of the loss, the enormity of what the murder of sixty thousand Jews of Salonika has cost us all, Jews and non-Jews alike.

Mr. Shaul Chazan, this interview will focus mainly on your period of work with the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz-Birkenau. Before I get started, however, let's take a quick look at your life before you went to Auschwitz. Where and when were you born?

I was born in 1924 in Salonika, Greece.

Would you like to tell us something about your family?

My father was a clothing merchant. We were four children, two boys and two girls. Two of us survived: my brother, who escaped to Athens and joined the partisans, and I.

Can you describe how it began, when the Jews of Salonika began to come under restrictions?

When the Germans invaded in 1941, one of my sisters was six years old and the other was eight. My brother was ten and I was sixteen. Daily life was usually undisturbed until 1942, but slowly we began to feel the yoke of the occupation. We all had to wear the yellow star, the "yellow blotch." The Germans broke into the homes of the wealthy, pilfered valuables, and looted the shops of Jewish merchants.

Afterwards, the Germans sent young Jewish men away for forced labor. On July 11, 1942, all Jews aged eighteen to forty-five had to report to Liberty Square, a large square in Salonika. I was eighteen by then. To get to the square, you had to go down a street that was full of SS men. We were all beaten, kicked, and cursed on our way to the square. The square was half full by the time we got there and very slowly filled up totally with young men by the deadline they'd given us.

Around the square, on the rooftops, German men and women stood and stared at us as if they were watching a play. All of us had to do difficult calisthenics in the severe heat and the weaker ones were hit with batons to humiliate them even more. Others were beaten until they bled. Then they began to search for men who were elegantly dressed; anyone who was caught took a brutal beating. They rolled those people down the street like barrels and asked them; "Are you a capitalist, by chance?" They tortured those people to death. This abuse lasted from the morning until the afternoon. In the meantime, they began to register the men. I stood aside; I was in no rush to sign up. A little before two, those who hadn't registered were told to come back on Sunday.

On Sunday, those who hadn't registered assembled. I didn't go there, I didn't

sign up, and I stayed off the list. What was I supposed to do then? In the meantime, they began to assign all the men who'd signed up for forced labor in Salonika and in the villages nearby. This went on for about three to four months.

The ghetto period began then, didn't it?

The ghetto was established in late 1942 or early 1943 in the Baron Hirsch quarter.[2] The ghetto was divided into two zones, southern and northern. They imposed restrictions on movement and soon the Jews were not allowed to leave the ghetto at all. Living conditions in the tiny houses were unbearable.

How did the Jews make a living?

Those who did forced labor outside the ghetto sold their property to Christians in the market. In the ghetto itself, food was handed out. And then the transports to Auschwitz began.[3]

The deportations began in March 1943. The first to be transported were those who lived in the Baron Hirsch quarter, in the ghetto. Additional ghettos were set up around Salonika—north and south of town—and a small part of the ghetto population was deported each time. In May 1943, our turn came. They took us all, the whole family. First they took us to the Baron Hirsch ghetto. A few other families that hadn't been agile enough to escape were there. In the meantime, the Germans had the young men removed from the population that was earmarked for deportation—at least twelve hundred young men, including myself.

Where were the forced laborers taken?

We people, the young Jewish forced laborers, were put to work building the Salonika-Athens railroad. Four labor camps were established especially for the Jews: Viba, Assopo, Lianoklandkion, and Karia. About three hundred Jews worked in each of these camps. I was sent to Assopo, in the mountains near Athens. I worked there for three months. We lived in barracks. We were guarded by Germans and members of other nationalities, mainly Yugoslavs and Ukrainians who'd been inducted into the Organisation Todt,[4] and they treated us violently. Everything there was done mercilessly and cruelly.

How did this part of the ordeal end?

In August 1943, we finished the job and we were taken back to the Baron Hirsch ghetto. There we discovered that they'd deported our families; all the families had been sent to Auschwitz. In my group, which returned to the ghetto from the Karia camp, there were three hundred men, all as skinny as sticks. The food in the ghetto was better than it had been in the labor camp where we'd built the railroad.

One day a week or two later, at around two P.M., we were ordered to pack our things. We were told that we were going to Poland. When I heard that, I

fled from the ghetto with my brother at the last moment. The transport left, but my brother and I and a few other people managed to evade it.

Where did you flee?

We all went in different directions. My brother and I didn't know what to do. I remembered a shop in Salonika where I used to work. The shop had a department in the basement, and a Greek whom I knew worked there. After we told the Greek our story, he said, "Stay here, in the basement." We stayed there and went into hiding. About half an hour later, he raced over and said, "You've got to get out of here." When we asked him why, he said, "They saw you. They'll get us all into lots of trouble." When we asked him what to do, he answered, "Get out of here, go straight to that village. There you'll certainly find partisans. You have no other choice." We took his advice. In fact, he was a good man who really wanted to help us but was afraid of endangering himself.

So we wandered like nomads from place to place. Following the Greek's advice, we walked in the middle of the road, ten meters apart. Fortunately, we had a little money on us. I said to my brother, "We have to find a way to get to the partisans." We wandered for five days, day and night, until Germans and Greek collaborators captured us in a mountainous area. My brother had a birth certificate and an ID card; I didn't have any papers at all. I asked my brother for his birth certificate and added my own name. In other words, I forged it.

"Who are you?" they shouted at us when we were captured.

"Jews," we answered.

"What are you doing here in the mountains?"

"We're working here, in the villages."

"Where have you been until now? All the Jews from Salonika have already been arrested!"

They continued to interrogate in that manner and beat us severely. "Don't you know that everyone in Salonika has been arrested?"

"No, we've been working in the villages."

We were interrogated and beaten over the head and on the soles of our feet. Even though it hurt, we stuck to our story about being workers in the countryside and didn't tell them that we'd escaped from Baron Hirsch. That's because if someone escaped from the Germans, they wouldn't hesitate to kill them then and there.

But the Germans didn't believe us and decided to investigate us thoroughly. I was taken first and ordered to remove my socks and shoes. They tied the soles of my feet to a stick, tied my hands downwards, and hit me on the soles of my feet. "Talk," they said. "Where are the two of you from? Are you partisans?"

"We're not partisans."

The beatings on the feet continued until I lost all feeling in my legs and feet. It hurt so badly that my sense of feeling disappeared.

I knew I couldn't do a thing; I had nothing left to say. We were doomed. At that moment, the German who conducted the interrogation came close to me and said, "Very well. If you don't want to tell the truth . . ." Suddenly I heard a gunshot. Then the officer said again, "If you don't want to tell the truth, what happened to your brother will happen to you. We have just shot him." I stuck to my story about knowing nothing and again they hit me on my feet and legs. A few minutes later, I was taken to a forest and forced to undress. A sergeant began to interrogate me again.

"Jew, tell me where you were!"

"Nowhere. I was just moving around among the villages." I was so afraid of being killed that I didn't tell them that I'd escaped. I made up a story about how I'd been working in the countryside. That's how I stayed alive.

"Tell me the truth! Where were you? Do you belong to the partisans?"

"I'm not a partisan. I move around from village to village to make a living," I answered.

He aimed the rifle at me and asked again: "Talk. What do you know about the partisans?"

"Nothing," I answered again.

"Talk or I'll shoot you."

After it slowly dawned on him that he couldn't get a thing out of me, he cursed and sputtered and took me to Pavlo Mela.

What was Pavlo Mela?

Pavlo Mela was a prison in Salonika. They interrogated me there—"Partisans . . . did you see them?" So they started the whole thing all over. They held us there for six months. During that time, more Jews were brought in until our numbers grew to ten, as many as fifteen Jews. Salonika had been emptied of its Jewish population except for a few who'd evaded the raid and several Jewish families that held Spanish citizenship. Only a few Jews remained in all of Greece—in little places like Ioannina, Larissa, or Athens itself.

What happened next?

Before the Jews of Athens were put in the Haidar concentration camp,[5] we were taken from the Pavlo Mela prison to Athens. There we were treated appallingly. I remember an especially cruel SS officer who took us to a Christian dentist and asked him, "Tell me, what are these?" The dentist examined us and answered innocently, "They're human beings." In response, the officer shouted, "No, they're lowly Jews!"

We were the first group that came to Haidar. We stayed there for several months, until the roundups of the Jews of Athens began. At first they brought

in the Jews who hadn't been registered yet, including Leon Cohen, whom I met there.[6]

The camp filled up slowly until—unless my memory has failed me—we were sixty Jewish prisoners. One day, the order was given to round up all Jews in Athens who'd already registered and to bring them to Haidar. They were all arrested on one day and taken to Haidar. The ten Jews from Salonika and the Jews from Athens spent about a week together there.

A few days later, in April 1944, we were taken by train to Auschwitz. The trip lasted ten days. The transport was made up of Jews from various places: Arta, Ioannina, and other places.

Please describe your arrival in Auschwitz.

The first thing I heard from the Germans was, "Leave everything here and get out of the train fast." All the families climbed down from the train and the *Selektion* on the platform began. This was a little before eleven A.M. People were sent from Auschwitz to Birkenau.

Did the name Birkenau mean anything to you at the time?

Nothing. We were pretty sure that they'd put us to farm labor. When we got there, we went straight into a living hell.

What memories do you have of those first moments in Birkenau?

I remember that Leon Cohen was the only one of us who spoke German. When he asked one of the prisoners where our families were, the prisoner pointed upward to the smokestack and said, "They're going to heaven." We thought he was talking nonsense. As time passed, we realized that something terrifying was happening there. A pungent smell of charred flesh hung in the air. We were sent to the showers and had numbers tattooed onto our left forearms. My number was one hundred eighty-two thousand five hundred twenty-seven. From then on, that was my name. My name was no longer Shaul.

Can you describe this in greater detail?

They tattooed the number on my arm as soon as I got there. They took us to the shower room, shaved our hair, took away all our clothing, gave us prisoners' clothing, and tattooed on the numbers. There was someone there with a pencil and a sizzling needle, and he tattooed the number into each man: five dots, five jabs, and blood began to flow. Like cattle, as if they were branding us, marking us like cattle, that's what they did with us, too. We were like cattle, like animals.

As they tattooed those numbers in the shower rooms, we could smell the acrid smell of scorched flesh, but we didn't yet think that they were incinerating people.

Where were you taken after the tattooing?

At midday they gave us a portion of soup and then they took us to the "quarantine."[7] Very unfortunately for me, that very evening I went out innocently to piss at the fence. We didn't know that we weren't allowed to go out and walk around. The Polish block elder grabbed me and hit me with his fists until he broke my nose. He could have killed me with his fists. We spent two weeks in the "quarantine."

How were people chosen for the Sonderkommando?

The Germans simply visited the "quarantine" and picked out 250 strong men for labor. We didn't know what we'd been chosen for until we began to work. We began to march to work with another 200 men.

How many of the 200 men were Jews from Greece?

They were all from Greece because it had been a transport from Greece. Later on, at the crematorium, there were also Poles, Czechs, and Russians. At Crematorium III [IV], there were also three non-Jewish Russians.

We walked and walked. On the way, we asked, "Where are we going to work?"

"In a factory," was the answer. Then we reached a small forest. We looked around, and what did we see? A little rustic house, a cottage all by itself. We went in, and when they opened the door we could hardly believe our eyes. The whole interior of the house was filled with bodies from a transport, more than a thousand corpses. The whole room was filled with bodies. I remember them picking out six or seven men—I was one of them—and raining blows on us. "Move it, move it, start working!" Shrieking, beatings, they didn't give us a chance to think about what we'd just seen. We had to remove the bodies. There was a pool there, a deep pit, called a "bunker."[8]

We had to pile the bodies on top of each other like sardines. Other workers split logs and we did everything in sequence—wood, corpses, wood, corpses, corpses, corpses, until the whole pit was filled. A barrel of gasoline stood there; it had been prepared beforehand. The SS man who was in charge poured the gasoline, pulled out a hand gun, and fired a few rounds to set the gasoline on fire. You couldn't use a match. The fire took hold and corpses, corpses, corpses, corpses, throw 'em in, throw 'em in, burn 'em, burn 'em, burn 'em. On and on, endlessly. That's how it was. "Move it! Move it!" Beatings all the time. "Burn all these corpses and wipe out this transport!" We were told that we'd be working twelve hours, but that was never twelve hours! We got there at two and we didn't leave until two the next day. That's twenty-four hours straight.

Where was the pool that you mentioned a few minutes ago?

The pond was also called a "bunker." Just now, when I returned to Ausch-

witz, I didn't find the pit or the cottage. It must have been behind Crematorium IV [V].

Can you describe the pit?

It was very deep, I think about four meters deep. The bodies were thrown in from above. We stood in a group and placed them up on top of each other. We went into the pit with a ladder. After we filled the pit, they dumped the gasoline onto the bodies and the SS man fired a bullet and started the fire. The fire burned day and night, and it was our job to throw the bodies in, non-stop.

Where did the bodies come from?

Near the pit, there was a little house that was used as a gas chamber. After the people went in, the gas was thrown in and they felt that they were choking. Then they shouted "Shema Yisrael" to heaven, but no one heard the shouting, no one glanced. Sometimes I asked myself, "Where are God's wonders and miracles?"

How far was the pit from the cottage where they poisoned the people?

A few meters, maybe thirty meters.

Were the bodies piled into the pit in any particular order?

Yes. We laid the bodies in rows and placed pieces of wood on top of each row: corpses, wood, corpses, wood.

What kind of wood did they use?

The wood was taken from tall trees, not boards but real hunks of logs.

How many Sonderkommando men worked at the "bunkers" at the time?

About three hundred men in all, I think.

Did you ever see a woman among the Sonderkommando workers?

No, only men were there. People said that at first there was a woman there who shaved her hair, but I didn't see her.

Where did you sleep at the time?

We slept in a barracks in Birkenau, number 11 or 13. From there we walked to work everyday. When we returned to the barracks, they made us sing. We sang songs in Greek, folk songs.[9] The Germans loved the sound of the Greek language. We sang very loudly.

Was your barracks under guard?

Yes, but it wasn't necessary because we were sealed in from the outside. What's more, there was nowhere to escape to. The latrines were also in the barracks, so there was no need to go out.

Was there enough food?

We got the same food as all prisoners in the camp. When you have a job like this you don't think about food at all. The only thing I thought about was how to escape.

Did you have time to converse with other Sonderkommando members as you worked?

No, the Kapo always pushed us to work faster. As time passed, we got particularly depressed. We didn't feel like thinking people anymore. We just worked, ate, and slept, like automatons.

Were you beaten during that time?

Everyone was beaten, not just me. We were beaten on the back and over the head. This system didn't leave us any time to reflect about where we were and what we were doing. Whenever we lagged even a little, they beat us right away.[10]

With what did the Germans hit you?

They hit us with a rod or a lash. The SS men had special rubber tubes.

When did you first see a transport of Jews arriving at Birkenau?

Several transports came in the first two weeks. I remember when I first saw a transport arrive—I heard screaming. The screaming that erupted from the peoples' throats was hard to believe. It was a huge transport—almost three thousand people. The screams reached up to heaven. Then the Germans slaughtered those people, not one by one but by the thousand! Even at that early phase, I asked myself, "Where are God's wonders and miracles?" They threw the gas in and murdered them all!

Once I saw a woman who was left behind, outside, with a little baby. The gas chamber filled up, the doors were locked, and the woman and the kid remained outside. Who knows, maybe others remained, too. But I saw only the woman and her child. I can still see it as if it were yesterday. An SS man, a young guy, eighteen or twenty years old, tore the kid from its mother's arms and killed it, and then he killed the mother, too. He shot the two of them in cold blood.

One evening, after the corpses had been cremated, a truckload of old, sick, and disabled people came by with clothing and other things, and they dumped everything out of the truck as if it were a load of gravel, straight into the pit—while the people were still alive! I saw this twice—once on my first day of work with the Sonderkommando and again, when other transports came. The people were thrown into the "bunker" and burned alive. I also remember a Greek Jew from the Sonderkommando who jumped into the fire. He saw what was going on and leaped into the pit. That was that.

When you reached the pits, there in the forest, what did you feel?

We had a gut feeling that we couldn't identify. We didn't know a thing. On the one hand, I saw the bodies down there; on the other hand, the Kapo and the SS men were beating me and cursing at me all that time, to the accompaniment of barking dogs. It was hell on earth. If there's a hell after death, I think it

must look like that. It was hell, real hell. There it wasn't a question of whether to believe or not. A person who finds himself in the middle of Birkenau today doesn't know, doesn't understand how such a thing could have happened: a young guy, twenty years old, in the SS, shooting a baby who's few months old and then shooting his mother. How could such a thing have happened in our world? What were the inner thoughts of the young guy like?

When did you begin to work at Crematorium II [III]?

Eventually the Germans figured out that cremating the corpses in pits, as they did in Birkenau, wasn't an appropriate solution. What's more, winter was coming fast, so they couldn't carry on that way. That's why they began to incinerate the people in crematoria. They assigned us to work in the crematorium. I went to Crematorium II [III] and stayed there until the end.

A transport arrived almost every day, sometimes more than one. Cremations took place every day. Day and night, they burned the bodies of Jews there. The furnaces burned day and night and we always had to clean up the crematorium and the cremation facilities.

Can you describe what the crematorium building looked like from the outside?

From the outside it looked like a rather ordinary building made of red bricks. The undressing rooms and the gas chambers were in the basement. The furnaces were on the ground floor and on the upper floor was a loft. From the outside, it looked like an ordinary building. You'd never suspect a thing. The crematorium was surrounded by an electric fence with watchtowers. Even when someone managed to escape, he had nowhere to escape to. Germans were stationed in every corner, the guarding was top-notch.

Was there always a guard at the crematorium gate?

Certainly. There were two shifts there, day and night. Twice a day we were counted at roll call. Escape was absolutely out of the question.

Can you describe the work at Crematorium II [III]?

At Crematorium II, everyone had a specific job. The work took place in two shifts: night shift and day shift. Each shift was twelve hours long. I worked in the undressing room and also removed bodies from the gas chamber.

The Germans rushed the victims into the undressing room and beat anyone who lagged behind. They left no time for reflection. "Move it! Move it! Move it!" Those were the only words you could hear there. They didn't give anyone a moment to wonder where he was. Anyone who got there couldn't think at all. The undressing room was underground; it had benches and hangers. Everyone who'd arrived was told they had to hang up the clothes and remember where they'd hung them. They said that so no one would imagine what was coming. The people undressed, crossed the room, and filed into the gas chamber one after another.

Where were you as the people undressed?

We were in the undressing room. There were Germans there, too. They stood there with batons and moved the people along. The Germans didn't allow us to talk with the people because we might disclose something to them. After everyone had choked to death on the gas, we were able to start working.

Did people occasionally refuse to undress and insist on keeping some of their clothes on?

It certainly could have happened, but I didn't see it. They were taken to the gas chamber and that was that. The Germans beat them and shouted at them as they went, so it all happened at record speed.

Please describe a day in your working life, from morning to evening.

Sometimes I had to work with people who'd already put in twelve hours straight and had actually finished their shift. The job was only half done; half of the gas chamber room was still full and I had to drag the bodies out. When we finished, we poured water onto the floor of the room, cleaned out remaining Zyklon crystals that had been dropped in from above—through the latticework shafts—and the gas chamber was tidy and ready for use again.

In the meantime, a transport came in from the other side and by then I was stuck there for another eight hours—after I'd already worked four hours to finish the work that remained after the previous transport had been killed off. When the transport came, the people were led down to the undressing room. The gas chamber was clean by this time, the ventilation was working according to regulations, there was no odor, and they were taken to the gas chamber. After the doors were closed, the ventilation was turned off and the people began to notice that they were about to die. By then, however, there was nothing they could do. It was all over.

Did you know beforehand what country the transport had come from?

No, we heard nothing but rumors. The "Kanada" workers were always the first to know everything because they were on the platform. There was a junior officer who rode a motorcycle; he told us when a transport was going to arrive so that we could start up the furnaces.

How far in advance did you get the information?

An hour or two, so that we'd begin to stoke the furnaces with coal and get the fire to burn properly. The idea was that everything should be ready. By cremation time, I mean, when the bodies were to be thrown in, the fire was supposed to be burning nicely. It was like a barbecue, where you have to start the fire beforehand. You can't have a barbecue without fire, can you? It was the same thing here. The whole thing was the same.

How were the victims divided among the crematoria?

When Crematorium II [III] was working at full capacity, the transport was

taken to Crematorium III [IV]. There was a German who rode on a motorcycle. He was called the "angel of death." He rode over and said where the furnaces should be fired up. He was a little guy, always the same fellow. He knew everything about dividing up the work. After all, it was his job.

Another SS man, officer Moll, was a real sadist. He'd stick a whistle in people's mouths and shoot at it. Sometimes he shot people in the head. They were all sadists. Moll always wandered around the crematorium.

Did the transports usually arrive at night, or did they also come in the day?

Some by day, some by night. But it didn't make a bit of difference. What mattered was when the crematorium was empty. Sometimes the transports had to wait on the railroad track because there wasn't any room in the crematoria.

Please describe your encounter with the people who arrived in the transports. Did you have a chance to converse with them?

No. After all, I didn't speak their language. I only knew Greek and Ladino. Just once, I managed to speak with them. I found a neighbor of mine from Salonika in a transport from Buna. I saw him from afar, tottering on one leg. "Shaul, how are you?" he asked. "How are things?" I asked him. I was shocked to see him there.

"Bombs, the Americans, I got wounded and they had to cut off my leg." Then he asked me exactly how he would die.

So he knew that his end was near?

Yes, definitely. He knew it from the moment he came to the crematorium. I asked him, "Why? What good will it do you?"

"No! You've got to tell me. At least we should know," he answered. He wasn't concerned about the very fact that he was going to die; he just wanted to know everything.

So I told him. "Here's how it works: you get undressed in the basement, with everyone else, and then all of you go to the gas. The gas finishes you off, and then they burn the corpses." He wanted to know, so I told him.

Personally, I wasn't sure if I'd get out of there alive. I knew that one die I'd die too, but I didn't know when, maybe the next week, maybe the following month. Life didn't matter anymore; death was too close. We never thought about life but we thought about death day and night, every minute.

Weren't you afraid of finding relatives among the corpses?

No, because my family had been sent there in 1943 and I hadn't arrived until 1944.

Did anyone in the Sonderkommando find a relative?

On one occasion, a man who had a brother in the Sonderkommando came. He [the brother] knew the SS men who worked there. He asked one of them to

save his brother from extermination. The SS man answered, "He'll die one way or another, if it isn't today, it'll be tomorrow." The SS man saved him from the crematorium but put a bullet in him somewhere else.

Once a transport from Corfu came. One of my co-workers in the crematorium was a former Greek army officer named Peppo-Josef Baruch.[11] He heard that his family had arrived from Corfu and had been taken to Crematorium IV [V]. Polish Kapos who were in contact with the Germans worked there. He told them that his family had arrived and he wanted permission to visit them in Crematorium IV [V]. They let him do it; he walked over to Crematorium IV [V] and saw his family. Afterwards, I asked him, "Josef, did you tell them that they were about to be murdered?" He answered, "How could I tell them such a thing? I just couldn't do it." He saw his relatives, but didn't say a thing. Really, what could he have told them? If he'd told them, what good could it have done by then?

And you, yourself—couldn't you make personal contact with anyone other than the group from Greece?

No. There weren't any more groups from Greece. See, it was almost over by the time I came. The last Greeks were the ones from Corfu, who were sent to Crematorium IV [V] and wiped out.

Do you remember any group in particular?

Yes, once two hundred children aged eight to ten came. They knew they were about to be killed. Someone had told them. They brought them in. It was especially terrifying and ghastly.

Where were the children from?

I don't know, maybe from Poland.

Please describe the gas chamber.

The gas chamber at Crematorium II [III] was underground. It had gray walls and a gray ceiling. The floor was concrete. The chamber was large enough for a transport of twenty-five hundred people if not more. The transports were always led into the gas chamber in one go. They pushed everyone in. They looked like shower rooms. They had a ventilation system that created a flow of air. There were showerheads in the ceiling, next to each other. The whole ceiling was full of showerheads. They were for "disinfection," the people were told. Everyone who entered the chamber really thought he was going to take a shower. But not a drop of water came out of those showerheads. The people were packed in until the gas chamber was full. The door was locked after everyone was inside.

What happened after the door was closed?

After the door was closed, the ventilation was turned off. Then some Germans rolled up in a car that had a Red Cross emblem on it. The cans with the

gas were in the car. One of the Germans put on a mask and threw the gas in from above the chamber—the contents of one can through one window, the contents of the second through the next, and so on. What kind of gas was it? It looked like bits of gravel. After a few seconds or a few minutes—our brains weren't working very well because of what was happening there—everyone was dead. As soon as they'd they died, the door was opened and we had to run for our lives. Sometimes there were still residues of toxic gas there and we might have choked if we'd inhaled it.

How many doors did the gas chamber have?

One door. The people entered the chamber through it and we used it to remove their bodies. The door was a little larger than the door of a house. A heavy door made of iron.

Were women and men together in the gas chamber?

Everyone was together, whole families, layer upon layer of them. They were always all together.

Could people move around freely in the gas chamber?

Absolutely not! It wasn't possible, and no one could get out. There wasn't enough room. The people were packed up against each other like sardines.

Were you often inside the chamber?

Yes, yes, regularly.

You said that the gas was thrown in through openings in the ceiling. Did it fall straight to the floor or onto the people's heads?

No, no. There were several openings. A latticework shaft came down from each opening. The mesh was made of perforated metal; it ran from the window in the ceiling to the floor. And the gas, in the form of little pellets, was thrown down the hollow shaft. The smell spread. That was the gas.

Did the shaft reach the floor?

Almost. A small space was left so that you could clean there. We poured water on the floor and swept up what remained of the pellets. We always poured water there; that made it easier to drag and pull the corpses along the floor and to clean up the feces and the filth[12] left by the victims.

The Germans knew exactly how to design the gas chamber with maximum efficiency. Even if they'd left the people there for a whole hour without gas, everyone would have suffocated. It was enough to close the door. The room was hermetically sealed. The walls were made of concrete; there was no way for fresh air to come in, nothing. The ventilation system made it possible to enter the chamber without risk of choking.

How did the ventilation system work?

The ventilation was installed in the walls. You wouldn't notice it; all you could feel was the chill. You could hardly hear it. There was a metal cover with

openings and cold air came in almost the entire length of the wall. The ventilation worked all the time; it was turned off only when the gas was thrown in. The Germans did a very effective job of camouflage. They considered it supremely important to maintain a mantle of secrecy until the last moment. Perfect deception.

Was it dark there, or was the chamber illuminated after the people were packed in?

There was lighting; there had to be since the Germans looked down to see whether everyone had died. So the people stood in the light. The window in the door was pretty large.

When the SS men opened the shaft from overhead and threw in the gas, could the people see that something was happening, that something was being thrown in?

All you could notice was the pungent smell of the gas as it spread. Then the screaming began. Everyone was inside, the door was closed, no ventilation, and then they began to sense the gas. Only at that moment did the people realize that they'd been tricked.

Could you hear the people screaming?

I remember that they prayed. I often heard the prayer "Shema Yisrael." There wasn't much left to say, not much more than "Shema." But no one heard, no one saw. I often told myself, "Where should the wonders and miracles take place if not here and now?" But nothing happened. It wasn't a matter of ten people; it was an entire people. Wonders and miracles were definitely needed there, but nothing happened.

How long did it take until the door of gas chamber was opened again?

The door was opened after the SS men checked to make sure that everyone was really dead. But you couldn't go near then, because there was still active gas in the air. It endangered the lives of anyone who stood there. The door was opened, the SS man backed away, and then the ventilators were turned on and the door stayed open for half an hour. The gas wafted away and we could begin to work.

What did you see at the moment the door of the gas chamber was opened?

I saw the corpses, dead people standing like statues. The odor was horrible, since the people had lost control of their bowels out of sheer fright.

Did the bodies have a special color?

I didn't notice that. We didn't think about the people; we thought about the air. If we thought about the people, about the place where we were, we would have gone insane at once.

Did it ever happen that someone was still alive after the door of the gas chamber was opened?

I never encountered any such thing. In my opinion, it couldn't have happened. Everything was sealed and the gas couldn't seep out.

After a few days, did you become indifferent to the sight of the gas chamber being opened?

I'd stopped being human by then. If I'd been human, I couldn't have endured it for even one minute. We kept going because we'd lost our humanity.

Did it ever happen that people who waited their turn outside the gas chamber were eventually murdered elsewhere?

When the gas chamber filled up and ten or twenty people still remained outside, all naked, they were taken upstairs to a place near the furnaces that looked like a guard's booth and were all shot in the back of the neck by a handgun with a silencer.[13]

The Germans shot people upstairs, near the furnaces. I was told about the time that a Jewish family from Germany came. Back in Germany, the German guard had been their neighbor. They ate and drank together all that night, and in the morning the guard shot them all, each one separately. That's how the SS men behaved. Right afterwards, the Sonderkommando men who worked upstairs carried the corpses to the furnaces. There was nothing else to do; they'd been shot right there.

Half an hour after the gas chamber door was opened and the ventilation was turned on, we began to work. We opened the windows in the ceiling and began to remove the bodies. Each of us did his own job. I worked with the bodies.

I apologize for asking you to go into such detail. Exactly what did you do?

We began to take out the bodies. At first we didn't know exactly how. The bodies were pressed to each other, stuck to each other like sardines. Then they brought us a long pole, a pitchfork, and explained, "Grab them by the loose skin and tug. That way you'll manage to remove the whole body." And that's just what we did: we removed the bodies with the pitchfork because it couldn't be done otherwise. The gassing made the bodies stick to each other as if they'd been glued. We removed bodies without a moment's break. As the gas chamber slowly emptied out, we had more room to maneuver. We poured water on the concrete floor to make it more slippery and to make the bodies easier to drag.

Did all of you have to remove bodies from the gas chamber?

Yes, every prisoner carried one body each time. For lack of space, two men went in first. Afterwards, after a few bodies had been taken away, there was room for more people to enter and remove bodies. That's how we divided the work among ourselves.

Who poured the water on the floor?

We did. Whenever we felt that the floor was dry, we turned on the tap.

What method did you use to remove the bodies?

One after another, body after body. One, two, one, two, one, two. It went slowly; it took hours. It wasn't something you could do in a minute. It was like a warehouse full of crates that you have to take out, except that we removed bodies. Other than that, the whole thing worked the same way.

Did you have to use force to separate the bodies?

Yes, sometimes. We did almost everything with a pitchfork, not with our hands. The pitchfork made it easier to separate the bodies.

How long did it take to remove twenty-five bodies from the gas chamber?

Twelve hours, maybe even longer. I didn't feel a thing; I thought I was dragging crates. We didn't treat the corpses with kid gloves; we just pulled them as if they were inanimate objects.

How were the bodies delivered from the gas chamber to the furnaces?

To carry the bodies from the lower level, where the gas chamber was, to the furnaces, we needed an elevator. We packed six to eight bodies into the elevator, depending on the size of the bodies. The elevator went up to the furnaces, and there they were cremated.

Was it an electric elevator?

Yes, it was shaped like a large metal table on which the bodies were arranged. It was almost completely flat and it may have had walls on the sides. The elevator went a few meters up with its load of bodies and returned empty.

Please describe the cremation process.

We washed the bodies before cremating them. Cremation took place day and night. There, on the furnace floor, they developed a system: they put skinny bodies together with a fat body because fat speeded up the cremation process.[14] It was harder with skinny bodies; the fire refused to burn. This is how they cremated bodies all the time—we removed the bodies from the gas chamber and they were cremated upstairs. Everyone there had a specific job: before the cremation, they sheared the hair off the bodies, someone pulled out their teeth, and someone else removed rings and jewelry.

For the most part, however, you were in the group that removed the bodies from the chamber after the people suffocated . . .

That's right, from the time I first joined the Sonderkommando until I left Auschwitz, dragging bodies was my main job. Other prisoners—I was not among them—worked at the furnaces. Gabai, for example, worked at the furnaces. He threw bodies into the fire as though it were a factory job.

Was cremation the last stage in the process?

Not entirely. Corpses were removed from the gas chamber around the clock. They were cremated upstairs and every two or three days we removed the bones from the furnaces. We dealt with this on days when no transports

arrived. There was a warehouse full of bones there. First we had to smash the bones until they were no larger than pieces of gravel. All that remained of ten or twenty thousand people who'd come there over a two-week period was a little pile of gravel . . . Afterwards we took round wooden poles with handles and used them to pulverize the bones to dust. You wouldn't believe it: thousands of people turned into a heap of dust.

Where was this work done?

Next to the furnaces on the ground floor, but outside, in a yard under a little roof. The warehouse of bones, where we worked, was there, too. After we finished, we picked up the ashes and loaded them onto a truck.

We saw the transports arriving with their thousands of people, and all that remained of them the next morning were ashes. After a month, we saw the warehouse and its contents, the ashes of forty thousand human beings. That's all that remained of so many people.

Did you know what the Germans did with the ashes of the people they'd murdered?

Every few days or once a week, a few German trucks with prisoners came by and took the ashes to the river to wipe out all the evidence. They say that somebody once asked what they were dumping into the river, and the answer was "fish food." At first, we didn't know what they'd do with the bones and they were disposed of in the crematorium compound. A deep pit was dug in the yard and the bones were dumped there until an order was given to remove all the bones from the pit in order to pulverize them. At that stage, we removed the bones from a deep pit in the compound of Crematorium II [III] and what remained of them was hauled away in a truck. That's when they got the bright idea of throwing everything into the river and destroying all the evidence so that no one would see a thing.

How many people worked in the crematorium building where you worked?

The men were divided up into different jobs. Downstairs, a few people removed the bodies from the gas chamber and others carried the bodies to the elevator. The bodies were dragged a long way, so different men took over in the middle. A different group worked upstairs at the furnace level.

When did you wake up in the morning?

At six, if I'm not mistaken, when we worked the morning shift.

Did you eat something or did you go straight to work?

We ate something, but we didn't have much time for it even though we had enough food until the very end, when the Russians came. It was food that the people who'd been taken to the gas chambers had brought with them. The food had been left behind in the undressing room, and every member of the Sonderkommando took things here and there, whatever he wished.[15]

There was enough food to keep us alive, but we were in hell—with or without food, so what did it matter by then? In any case, we had no chance of survival. We were like mice in a trap, pinned on all sides. How could the mice escape from the trap? We had no chance whatsoever. How could we get out of there?

Were you given breaks now and then?

For the most part, there were no breaks. If you had something to eat, you ate while you worked. Sometimes people who found something edible in the transports ate it, and those who didn't find anything didn't starve because their buddies shared the food with them. The Germans took the liver out of the beef because they didn't like the taste. They brought the offal to the crematorium to be cremated. After it had been burned, we took the liver and cooked it. We ate it after work.

Did you occasionally drink alcoholic beverages?

Regular drinkers drank. I didn't. But there was liquor of all kinds.[16]

What did the Sonderkommando prisoners do after the shift was over?

We stayed there the whole time. They didn't let us go out. We were under quarantine. They kept us closed in and didn't even allow us to leave the crematorium building. The people who brought barrels of soup from the camp mess weren't allowed to enter the crematorium premises. Sometimes we had to go out and bring the soup so that no one in the rest of the camp would see us and so that we wouldn't see the others. The German guard watched us like a hawk. Anyone who got caught outside was wiped out then and there.

Did the Germans leave you alone during your spare time? How did you spend your off hours?

We ate, we sang songs, we did everything, whatever we wanted. There, upstairs, we could do whatever we felt like. We were on our own in the loft. When we didn't do anything, we went to sleep.

Just the same, didn't you ever leave the crematorium building to walk to the camp?

No, never. No way. We were totally isolated. This hurt us Greeks more than the others because we didn't understand the language they spoke there.

In other words, you never interacted with other prisoners in any way.

That's right. We had no contact with them. We lived all by ourselves.

Where?

Upstairs, in the loft of the crematorium, there was a room with wooden beds. We all slept there, two hundred men. The Kapo lived somewhere else.[17] It was a large area that was divided into little rooms. We went to work from there. I had to go down two floors; those who worked at the furnaces went down one.

Did the beds have mattresses?

We had simple straw mattresses and blankets, too, but there was no need for them because it was hot there. The furnaces down below heated up the whole building.

High-ranking guests occasionally visited the crematorium to observe the killing operation. Do you remember any visit in particular?

One day the Mufti came. He was right next to me. The Kapo said that it was the Mufti.[18] This was in August 1944. He wore a strange hat. He came to watch the cremations. Maybe he thought about doing something similar in Palestine. The Germans explained to him how the murder mechanism at the crematoria worked. They'd dressed him in German uniform except for the hat, which was his. I saw him outside, in front of the building. At that time, we were pulverizing the bones and the Kapo was working in the crematorium. I don't know how he blurted out that it was the Mufti. Apart from him, lots of Germans officers came to steal valuables that the victims had left behind. They did that often.

Did the Sonderkommando prisoners form close relations or friendships?

Yes, I had the opportunity to make friends with many of them, such as Josef Sackar, Leon Cohen, Peppo-Josef Baruch, Ya'akov Gabai, Marcel Nadjari,[19] Shlomo Venezia, and Dani Ben-Nachmias.[20] In fact, we weren't friends; we were brothers. They were everything, everything we had in life.

Did you make their acquaintance in Auschwitz or had you known them before?

I got to know all of them there. I'd met Leon Cohen in Athens, at the Haidar camp.

Did you occasionally discuss matters other than the terrible reality of your life?

All the time.

What did you talk about?

About Greece, our homeland until the war. In fact, there was nothing else to talk about. You couldn't think about the future. Really, we were waiting for death.

How did you communicate with Sonderkommando prisoners who were not from Greece?

In sign language! How could you learn a language there? It was a kingdom of death. We were walking toward death. Why bother learning anything?

How did the Germans treat you?

They always pushed us to work faster: "Schnell, schnell! Los, los, los!" ["Quickly, quickly! Move it, move it, move it!"] We knew that none of us would get out of there alive. We knew we'd all be murdered. Life played no

role in our thoughts. The Germans used any pretext, even the most trifling, to execute people on the spot, without trial, without wasting words, a gunshot and it was over and done with. Our lives weren't worth a thing.

Did some SS men stand out in particular for their sadism?

All of them were born sadists, but outwardly they looked like angels. Once an SS man came to do guard duty. He was a handsome guy, and I asked him, "How did a man like you get stuck here?" But he turned out to be the biggest sadist of them all. Once he murdered twenty men upstairs, on the upper floor, near the furnaces, one after the other, with a handgun. After each gunshot the corpse was thrown straight into the furnace, just like in the Mafia. Afterwards he washed his hands and said, "I just did a little work."

The worst sadists of all were there. A person lost his humanity there. There you felt every moment that the moment of death had arrived. You were always obsessed with the thought that your time was up, tomorrow or the day after, that your chances of survival were zero.

Our supervisor, Moll of the SS, was so zealous and crazy that he personally took part in the cremations. Once he was overheard saying that if Eichmann ordered him to cremate his family he'd do it. He revealed his sadism at times when he circulated among mothers who were about to be gassed and chatted with a boy whom they carried. He did it with a little chuckle on his lips. He'd hug the boy, give him some candy, and try to talk the mother into handing the boy to him. Then he'd take the kid to the pit and throw him into the fire alive.

You said that you spoke only Greek and Ladino. If so, how did you get along with the Germans?

I understood a few words, like *los!* [move it!], *Arbeit*! [work!], *antreten!* [come over here!], et cetera. It was enough.

Did you know the German who threw the gas in? Did you know his name?

No, we watched what was happening from a distance. We Greeks always stood aside. In any case, we didn't understand the language, so we didn't get too close to them. We thought it was safer that way.

Did the Germans beat you?

The Germans didn't beat us; that was the Kapo's job.[21] He didn't want to beat us. I don't want to blame anyone. Floggings, floggings. I was flogged, too, but I don't want to blame anyone. That's how it was. The Kapo saw a German approaching, and if he didn't flog us the Germans would kill him. After all, what was he a Kapo for? He had to make us work faster. There was no argument about that.

What happens to a man who sees so many bodies, thousands of dead people, all the time?

What was there to do about it? Nothing. We were there every day. One

month, two months, eight months I saw it without letup. Millions of Jews died that way, like Pharaoh's slaves. We didn't understand the language, didn't know what we'd stumbled into, didn't know a thing. We were like pieces of a ship that had broken up. Pieces of a ship—what on earth are they good for?

We always, always saw death around us. This one or that one would die today; your turn would come tomorrow morning or afternoon. Our thoughts focused on one thing only: death. We thought about nothing but death. Death and waiting for death became a daily routine. That's how it was there. What did you have there, other than death?

Didn't you think you would survive?

We told ourselves that we were living very close to death, as if we were on death row. We didn't know when it would happen; we didn't know a thing. We simply couldn't think about the possibility of survival. It was better not to think at all, not to think. Sometimes I asked myself, "Why don't people out there in the world know what's going on here?"

How did you cope with the situation?

I don't know. I can't explain it. I ate, drank coffee, drank tea, and did everything else among corpses, thousands and thousands of corpses. In that place, where they removed the corpses from the gas chambers, we also ate and drank—with the corpses. When I think about it today, I really don't know how a person can live under such conditions. How? How? I don't know. How? Bodies . . . Nowadays, when people living ordinary lives see a single body, it shocks them to the core. There we saw tens of thousands—little children, old people, young people, pregnant women. The lot! A whole nation.

Did you observe any of the religious commandments in Birkenau?

No, I couldn't. I have nothing against religion, but I was waiting for wonders and miracles there and they never came.

What can you tell me about suicides among the Sonderkommando prisoners?

When you don't have guilt feelings, you have no reason to commit suicide. We wanted to live. The men wanted to live even if they had no chance of doing so.

In other words, your conscience doesn't trouble you.

Correct.

In such a cruel world, was there any room for the will to survive?

No, it wasn't worth it, but a man lives, lives until the day he dies.

Did you ever think that you couldn't carry on? Did you ever want to die?

Yes, it happened. A friend and I wanted to inhale gas the moment the door to death opened. Life wasn't especially worth living then. I planned it with a friend who worked there with me, but in the end we went out, lay down, and

inhaled. That way, we were able to continue breathing. It was just an experiment and we didn't really give serious thought to suicide.

What do you know about the Sonderkommando uprising?

There was a Greek Jewish officer whom I'd known back in Greece, Peppo-Josef Baruch. He was in contact with two Russian prisoners of war who were being held in the camp. One of them was also an officer. Peppo and the Russian officer contacted the underground in Auschwitz-I. Very slowly they organized and brought explosives to Birkenau.[22]

They made all preparations for an attack and an escape. At some time they told us about the plans for the uprising. Everyone wanted to have something on him. What I had was a large penknife that was easy to hide. Everyone had a role to play in the uprising.

What was yours?

I was to pounce on the guards, grab them, wipe out the two guards inside, and take their uniforms. The plan was that two of us who spoke German would put on the uniforms and lead the Sonderkommando men out of Crematoria I, II, III, and IV [II–V], as if we were Germans bringing up the rear.

The plan was ready but after the uprising began on October 7, we suddenly heard that the Sonderkommando prisoners at Crematorium I [II] had escaped and had already been executed. Later on, they brought their corpses to us, in Crematorium II [III], and made us cremate them. So there was an attempt, but it didn't work out well.

Raoul Jahoun,[23] a prisoner in the Sonderkommando, escaped from Crematorium III [IV] and came to us, where his brothers were. There were four Jahoun brothers who'd been with me back at the Haidar camp. Raoul told us that the Sonderkommando at Crematorium III [IV] torched mattresses and set the whole building on fire. It looked like they'd all been executed. Afterwards, the Germans came around in their usual way to do a head count. They noticed that there was one prisoner too many. After they discovered Raoul, he was shot right there. I remember that his brother took his body and after it had been cremated he picked up the bones and put them in a crate. Leon Cohen wrote a letter and put it in the same crate. A tree stood there and we decided to use it as our marker, that is, we'd bury the crate with the bones under the tree. A little while ago, when I was in Poland, I looked for the place but everything had changed beyond recognition—stairs had been built there and I couldn't find a thing. It's very possible that the crate is still buried there.[24]

After the attempted uprising failed, the inspector of the camp came to investigate. "Did the prisoners really accomplish anything?" he asked the guards. "No, they didn't do a thing," they answered.

So that's how the uprising ended. There were guards everywhere. What

more could we do? Even if a person could have escaped from the camp, they would have murdered him. The uprising was poorly organized, nothing worked, everyone was murdered. We—the Sonderkommando men of Crematoria II [III] and IV [V]—were the only survivors.

We continued to work and when it was almost all over, in November 1944, we blew up the crematorium at the Germans' command. The Germans gave us tools and equipment to drill holes in the pillars, half a meter in diameter. When we finished, they put explosives into the holes and blew up the crematorium.

Are you referring to Crematorium II [III]?

I'm referring to all the crematoria. We began with Crematorium II [III]. Afterwards we went to I and finally to III [IV] and IV [V]. Each crematorium was blown up separately. The Germans didn't want any evidence of their existence to remain, anything that might remind anyone of the crematoria. Nothing. After the explosions, we piled up the bricks and hauled them away so as not to leave evidence. Fortunately, the Germans fled from the Russians so quickly that they couldn't destroy everything. They left some evidence: the shacks, a few buildings. Apart from that, nothing was found except for level ground.

Now we're coming to the last part of your term as a prisoner. What do you remember about that time?

They began to evacuate Birkenau in December 1944. The Sonderkommando prisoners were removed from Birkenau and sent to an isolated barracks. They wanted to execute us in order to destroy all the evidence. I said to my friends, "Something's not right here. Why are they closing us up?" They kept us in the barracks, out of touch with the outside world, but we heard the noises outside. We saw how all the people were coming out of the barracks for the "evacuation" and were marching away. We fled from the barracks and blended in with the crowd. We began to march with everyone else. We thought we'd survive that way.

When we reached Mauthausen,[25] two guards from Crematorium I [II] were searching for us and asking everywhere, "Who worked in the Sonderkommando?" In the meantime, we'd lost weight because we'd been marching for several days and had hardly eaten anything. So they couldn't tell us from the others. What's more, we wore our caps in a way that no one could recognize us. They searched and searched and didn't find us. They chased us all the way the Mauthausen! Imagine, to the last moment they searched for us so they could murder us.

Can you describe the so-called death march?

We marched toward Mauthausen in the snow, without food, not even a slice of bread. Everyone expected to get shot at any moment. Anyone who couldn't

march was shot without hesitation. But nothing that happened then, in the death march, could compare to what I'd seen at the crematorium.

We reached Mauthausen and were sent to work right away. I worked at Gusen[26] for a few months and then I was sent to the Melk camp.[27] In May 1945, the Americans liberated us in the forest where we'd been taken.

Can you describe the day of your liberation?

It was between May 5 and May 7, 1945. We were taken into a forest and were liberated there. On liberation day, the Sonderkommando prisoner Henri Jahoun died next to me. Two hours before liberation. He starved to death; there was nothing to eat there. Two hours before the liberation, he died.

The cold and the severe conditions gave me edema in my back. When I felt that there was something wrong with me, I wanted them to put me in the hospital but I couldn't speak the language. I walked to the place where the American troops gathered, lay down beside the tent regularly used by American soldiers, and said, "krank, krank" ["sick, sick"].

They found me there, saw the number on my forearm, and put me in a hospital in Linz, where I was cared for three to four months. When my condition improved, I thought it best to leave because the place was unpleasant. It swarmed with Germans; who knew what they were up to! All the Greek Jews who survived returned to Salonika.

How did you survivors return to your homeland?

I returned to Greece via Yugoslavia. At least a thousand Jews returned to Greece at that time—ten to twenty Jews every day, including acquaintances, friends, and my brother, who'd managed to escape back in Athens and joined the partisans.[28]

We had no money and the community couldn't do much to help. They made sure we got regular meals. Those days, we still thought it was worth waiting for all the Jews of Salonika to come back. I realized that no one there had any idea what had happened in the extermination camps. My brother and his friends once invited me to a restaurant. As we ate, his friends asked me to tell them about Auschwitz. I began to tell them: "No one will ever come back from there; they've all been butchered and cremated." Before I could get three words out of my mouth, my brother interrupted me as if to say, "Stop talking with him; he's not quite right in the head. Can you believe what he's saying? that they cremated human beings?" They wouldn't even believe someone who'd been there, like me. No one could grasp it.

After some time in Greece, I decided along with several other survivors that there was no other solution for us but Eretz Israel. Our families had been deported from Salonika to the camps and were murdered there. Nothing remained. How could we continue living there? Imagine a place where you and

your family used to live and tell yourself, "This is where I used to live, with everyone—a family with four children, four brothers and sisters, a mother, a father." That episode in life was over for us.

We moved to Palestine in 1946. We reached Haifa on the *Henrietta Szold,* a ship that carried illegal immigrants. Here war against the British awaited us. They wouldn't let us get off the ship.

We told them that we wanted to live here in Eretz Israel and that we had no other country, but the British forced us to go to Cyprus. I spent three months in a British camp in Cyprus with other Greeks from Salonika. Another camp was full of Jews who'd come from Romania and Poland via Italy. Cyprus was one big refugee camp. After three or four months, they began to divide us into groups in order to give us immigration visas to Eretz Israel. Since there weren't enough visas for even half the people in the camp, they decided to conduct a draw. I won the draw and was one of the first who immigrated to Palestine in 1946.

What happened after you arrived?

When I got to Palestine, I visited one of my uncles in Jerusalem, and what happened in Greece repeated itself. I began to tell the story and he didn't want to hear a word: "Don't talk rubbish! Do you think I believe you?" He didn't believe me either, and again I was considered mentally unsound.

He didn't want to believe you?

He didn't want to talk about it at all! Such a thing was inconceivable, incomprehensible. When I spoke about "cremations" and "murders," it wasn't considered normal . . . I wondered if I weren't mistaken after all. These are things that human beings can't grasp. Well, I've been careful since then. I don't say a word at home or to friends; even those closest to me don't know a thing. Why should I tell them if they don't want to believe me?

At first I did construction work. Then, when the War of Independence broke out, I joined the military and served two years in the navy. I left the military in late 1950 and got married in 1951. I have two children—a son and a daughter. Both are married.

How do you explain your survival to yourself? Was it luck? An ability to survive?

No, in fact it's hard to believe that I survived. I don't believe it to this very day. When I think about the fact that I'm alive, I always tell myself that I'm living in a camp—because there was no way to escape from there.

Do you think about it often? Are you often reminded of it?

There are things that can't be forgotten. I lost my whole family—mother, father, two sisters.

Do you ever dream about it at night?

No, I don't dream about it. I try to understand how I could have stumbled into such a situation.

Are you ashamed?

There's nothing to be ashamed about. A verdict was given against the Jewish people and against the Sonderkommando. None of us committed a crime; none of us ever stole a thing. We were the Germans' victims and they treated us as they pleased. Our only guilt was that we were Jews.

A question about faith, religion, and God: did you believe in God before what happened and lose your faith in the aftermath of the Holocaust? Or did your survival actually strengthen your faith in the divine providence that helped and directed you in your fate?

I believe in God, but not like religious people who've never experienced a thing. The miracle of my survival proves the existence of a supreme force that controls the world.

The thought that clings to me to this very day is the spectacle of two or three thousand people who become a heap of ash and dust by the next morning. Can one possibly forget such a thing? You can't. It wasn't something that someone told me or that I'd read in a book. I saw it with my own eyes; it's impossible to forget. Today I can feel something, but back then I didn't.

Today I ask myself in amazement what happened there and I try to find answers. After all, the victims were not criminals, or thieves, or murderers. They were all innocent of wrongdoing. How could such a thing have happened? There can be only one answer: we didn't have a state! That's the reason. If we'd had a state, such a thing could not have happened. It's a fact: whoever came to Eretz Israel before the war survived. And who helped? God? No. Well, maybe it was heaven-sent. . . .

The *haredim* [ultra-Orthodox Jews] claim that the Holocaust happened because the Jews didn't obey the Torah and observe the commandments, but in Greece everyone was religious. I went every evening to synagogue, on Shabbat and on Friday night. What good did it do? Now my priorities have changed: the state comes first and religion second. If someone wants to be religious, more power to him. But the state comes first and surpasses any form of religiosity. Any state other than Israel is meaningless for the Jews. In America, all the Jews pray and what use is it? They sit there and pray and think that such a thing won't happen to us again. Well, they're wrong.

I can hardly explain to people what I saw there. The transports came by day and by night, thousands of people, families of all kinds, from different countries. Today we have a state, and the young people who go to America to get rich ought to think it through to the end, about what'll happen to their children.

There's one last comment I'd like to make. One day, the moment they heard

that a transport from the Netherlands and Belgium had come, the great thieves of the SS rushed over. They all knew there were diamonds in Belgium. So two SS officers came down to the undressing room and searched the people there to find the diamonds. I heard them in conversation: "These Jews, they're so forsaken that they don't even have their own state." Then they slaughtered the Jews.

Now that we have a state, I'll never leave it—not for America, not for Paris, not for anywhere. That's because I saw for myself how valueless a stateless people is. A people should live in its own state and that state has to be strong. That's the lesson that I learned from my work in the Sonderkommando of Auschwitz-Birkenau.

7

Leon Cohen: "We Were Dehumanized, We Were Robots"

The portrait of a handsome young man rests atop the television set in Leon Cohen's room (see photo). The man who sat in the large armchair across from me was a faint shadow of that portrait. By the time I got to know him, Leon Cohen, the dashing fellow from Salonika, was a broken man. He walked with great difficulty; his health was precarious. Life had become a burden. He died a few months later.

Leon Cohen was not fluent in Hebrew. I conversed with him in English and a bit of French. Cohen was a worldly man. Had the Holocaust not occurred, he would probably have become wealthy and influential. His first wife, the daughter of Yehoshua Perahia, a wealthy Jewish banker from Salonika, lives in Athens today.

As a member of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz-Birkenau, Leon Cohen was given a horrific job: to rip gold teeth from the mouths of Jewish corpses. Day in and day out, he had to force apart dead people's jaws, which had been firmly pressed together, and search for gold inside the mouths. I do not know if this was the hardest job in the crematorium, but I suspect that tearing out pieces of the bodies of our slaughtered fellow Jews was especially depressing. Leon never forgot those days. His description was realistic and hair-raising. I still have visions of how he calculated with his fingers how many kilograms of gold he had prised from the bodies each day.

Fate did not smile on him in his last years, either. He was embittered, lonely, and destitute in his senescence. One of his most beloved relatives shunned him and returned to Athens. His health deteriorated. He received no reparations from Germany, evidently due to bureaucratic foot dragging or negligence. His facial features attested to his virtues and qualities: extreme honesty, decency, humanness, and avoidance of condescension and narcissism. Leon Cohen, I felt, was considerate of everyone but himself. This is definitely how he behaved in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Before the Holocaust, Leon Cohen was a merchant, who provided supplies to the Greek army. While still in his teens, he was already wealthy and an owner of property. The Germans plundered all his family's holdings in Salonika but could not deprive him of his pride and high-mindedness.

I will never forget the emotional impact of my few hours in Leon Cohen's company. He hosted me cordially at each of our three meetings. Only in the last few months of his life, when he felt very ill, did he apologize: "I'll get better soon. Then I'll be glad to meet with you again." He was bedridden when I last interviewed him; he would not get up again. Even so, he made an effort to answer my questions and recount the period of his life that he had spent in Auschwitz. Thank you, dear Leon. May this chapter serve as your memorial.

Mr. Cohen, I'd like to talk with you about your stay in Auschwitz-Birkenau, about the time that you served in the Sonderkommando. But first I'd like you to describe your childhood in Greece. Where were you born?

I was born on January 15, 1910, in Salonika. There I went to the Leon Gatenyo business school, a French-German institution. After I graduated, I looked for work. First I worked at the international fair that took place in Salonika back then. Later on, I worked for an enterprise that sold records and radio sets. Decca began to operate in Greece just then. Later on, I was drafted into the Greek army.

Did you receive a traditional education at home, or was it secular?

It was not particularly Jewish. The only thing related to Judaism that I still remember was the Hebrew lessons that we had once a week. The teacher taught the basic words: *ani* [I], *ata* [you], *hu* [he], *anahnu* [we]—really basic Hebrew. In contrast, I was given a superb French education, because the teacher was the principal and founder of the Chevalier de la Liaison Française school. He taught us the finest French literature.

What did your parents do for a living?

My father was a well-off, successful merchant. He imported goods from Germany and Austria. He was also a retailer in the private market. He had commercial relations with small merchants in Brussels. He had a business with fifteen employees. He spent six months on business trips outside of Greece.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

Yes, there were four of us. Apart from me, two survived the Holocaust—my brother Robert, who's living in Lyons, and my older sister Agnes, who lived in Paris from 1947 on and died several years ago. My younger sister Margot, who was pregnant at the time, was captured by the Germans and sent to the Baron Hirsch ghetto.[1] Later, they sent her with our mother to Auschwitz-Birkenau. The fetus was torn out of her womb before she could give birth and this led to her death, too. My father was lucky: he died of natural causes a year after the Germans entered Salonika.

How old were you when the Germans came to Salonika? What memories do you have of the first period of the occupation?

I was thirty then. Before the occupation began, I was an official supplier for the Greek Ministry of Defense. I supplied the ministry with goods of various kinds—a wide range of products apart from munitions. I had an agent in Germany, a man named Franz Jessen. He helped me to import important merchandise for the army. I ran a successful business and had many important connections. Doors opened for me wherever I went. Greece and Germany collaborated during the occupation; they did brisk business together.

What did you do in Salonika in the months leading up to the occupation?

I was drafted into the Greek army a few months before the Germans came. Don't forget that Italy and Greece were at war in the winter of 1940/41. Three months before the war, I made a large arms deal for the army. Back then, Greece was ruled by Metaxas, a dictator who'd managed to unify the nation. When the war broke out, the Greeks rose up in absolute unison to defend their homeland. The Jews were among them, of course.

Do you remember your first encounter with the Germans?

I definitely do. I was sitting in my office when the Germans came in and asked to have a conversation with me. They said they knew I was a supplier for the Greek army. I confirmed that and then they ordered me to supply the shipyard. They said they'd be in charge of the Defense Ministry from then on. I told them I'd do as they said; I didn't have a choice. In the meantime, I spoke on the phone with a friend named Barotzi who worked with Greek customs, and I told him about the Germans' demand. I explained to him that I did not want to serve as a supplier to the Germans and asked if he'd be willing to take on this function himself. He answered, "Yes, why not? But I've got no money." I put him at ease and told him that he'd surely find someone who would finance the procurements.

The decrees against the Jewish population became harsher and harsher. In the summer of 1942, thousands of young Jewish men, including myself, were summoned to the Platia Eleftherias [Liberty Square], where Greek soldiers

tortured us for hours under the scorching sun. The Germans stood all around, lapping it up, giggling, and taking pictures. I didn't have to be there all the time, since I had a document confirming that I was working for the Germans at the shipyard.

When was your next face-to-face encounter with the Germans?

It happened in 1942, when I was sent to the German prison in Salonika. I managed to escape and returned to my office, and together with another associate I put my business back together. Thus, for our security we managed to deposit a little money in our account with Union Bank, the largest Jewish bank in Salonika. I sent unsigned checks to the bank and in the afternoon I visited the bank personally and signed them. There, in the bank, I met my first wife. The fact that she was the daughter of Yehoshua Perahia, the owner and general manager of the bank, was something I found out much later. She was amazingly beautiful and very young. Her father was not especially keen on our marriage, but love overcame everything and we got married on Sunday, January 15, 1943, in Beit Shaul, the great synagogue of Salonika. The Germans sent the Jews of Salonika to Auschwitz two months later.

At first we were sent to a ghetto near my home in the lower city of Salonika. From there, we escaped to a more distant ghetto, where we thought that it would take the Germans longer to arrest the Jews and send them to the concentration camps. When we found out that the Germans were deporting Jews from this ghetto, too, we decided to escape to the ghetto in the King George quarter, near my sister-in-law's home, where only Jews lived before the war. By then, my father-in-law no longer owned the bank. The Germans had also expropriated his house, an opulent five-room place on the seashore. In the ghetto, ten people shared a small, cramped apartment. A good friend of my father-in-law, Nikos Hadziyanakis, insisted that we escape from the ghetto. No one in the family apart from my wife and me wanted to do that. They thought that escaping would put all of us in danger.

I had two good friends, both of them Christian. One of them was Barotzi, whom I've already mentioned; he worked for the customs authorities. The other one was named Tzambazi. They forged documents for us showing we were Greeks. My name was changed to Leonidas Kokinakis and my wife became Amalia Kokinaki. My in-laws' new Greek name was Peridis. One evening, my two Christian friends visited us in a state of great agitation and said that we had to pack our things right then and flee from the ghetto. They'd found out that the Germans intended to start transporting the Jews to the concentration camps the next day. Only my wife and I were prepared to escape; all the others refused. After the war, I found out that my sister-in-law, who'd been taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, told a friend in the barracks shortly

before she died of starvation, "What a terrible shame it is that we didn't listen to Niko. If only I'd listened to him and escaped from the ghetto."

Our friends had put together a plan: we were supposed to pretend that we were drunk. We took two bottles of ouzo and removed the yellow star from our clothing. I put on a hat and my wife put on a kerchief. Then we began to sing Greek folk songs loudly and burst into wild laughter. As we passed the Germans' main command headquarters, we walked deliberately singing and laughing. We even gave the Germans some of the booze. They said, "Danke schön, danke schön!" ["Thank you very much, thank you very much!"]

Our friends led us to a house in one of the poorest quarters in Salonika, and after we spent a few days there we went on to Sidirokas, a village outside Salonika. By then, no Jew could stay safely anywhere for more than a few days. The village was near the border of the Italian occupation zone. We spent at least a week there. The owner of the house where we'd found shelter knew a railroad technician who worked in the Italian zone. We made plans to escape with him in a military transport on a train to Larissa[2] and Athens. The landlord told the technician that we had gotten married against the wishes of the bride's parents and were eloping. The technician was willing help us by concealing us in his private locker, for a subvention, of course.

The trip took two days. We were crammed in the locker. We couldn't leave it for any purpose; otherwise, the soldiers on the train would discover us. A high-ranking Italian officer who was on the train found out about us, and we assumed that it was all over for us. However, to our great surprise, the officer chatted with us amiably and warned us not to break the security rules. We had no doubt that he knew who we were. When we said good-bye, he wished us all the best and kissed my wife on the cheek.

We got off the train at a small location not far from Athens and continued by taxi. In Athens, we went to 50 Aharnon Street, to the home of Dionissis Kolokotsas, who before the war had been an agent for my company in southern Greece. Although he had not known that we were coming, Kolokotsas let us into his apartment without hesitating. A few days later, we moved to the Patissia quarter of Athens, where we rented a small house. A month later, with the help of Nikos Hadziyanakis and a few employees of the Italian embassy in Athens, where my father-in-law had good friends, we were joined by my father-in-law's family. We had to give them false identities, since Perahia was fluent in Greek, both in speaking and in writing, but he looked unmistakably Jewish and his wife, my mother-in-law, spoke only French and Ladino.

In our next hideout, I told the owner, a man from Crete, that my mother-in-law was a deaf-mute and my father-in-law was a refugee from Asia Minor. To complete the camouflage, we posted pictures of Mary in our room and were

even visited by the local bishop. In the meantime, I'd found out that Nikos had rescued my in-laws in Salonika on many occasions, including one just before the Germans came to arrest them.

One day about three months later, I visited the barbershop, as I did each and every day to hear the news and get a little fresh air. Inglessis, the barber, was a collaborator—I didn't know it at the time—and he denounced me to the Germans. My father-in-law had wanted to come with me that day but fortunately he stayed home. This traitor, who knew that my father-in-law was a wealthy banker, tried one day to entrap him by means of my wife. His scheme didn't work out well, however. By chance, one of my Greek friends was at the barbershop that morning. Right after I was arrested he called a good friend of his, a manufacturer named George Ladas, who rushed over the house where my wife and her parents were hiding, told them I'd been arrested, and urged them to get out fast.

Once again, they hesitated and he had to remove them, almost by force, to a safe apartment in a wealthy quarter of Athens that belonged to the family of a good friend of my wife's. There they were greeted with unsurpassable good will and warmth. My wife and in-laws could have spent the whole war there. But my father-in-law, a considerate person by nature, didn't want to be a burden to anyone and to exploit the generosity of these friends. He preferred to move to a different hideout. So my wife and in-laws moved to an isolated house in the Kalithia area, far from downtown Athens, and shared a room in the landlord's apartment.

One day, my wife had problems with her ears and went to a Greek doctor named Athanassios Papathanassopoulous for treatment. Papathanassopoulous, like his father, was a Freemason and therefore was willing to help her and her parents. He took them to his clinic and, with the help of two other doctors, concealed them in various homes. My wife rode out the war in the home of the doctor's mother and my in-laws did the same in another apartment. The doctor made sure they were able to get together in the evening. All three doctors took care of my wife and her parents devotedly.

What happened to you after the Germans arrested you?

The German agents took me to a pharmacy on the street corner and then to Gestapo headquarters on September 3 Street. They pointed a handgun at my forehead, ordered me to shut up, and drove me to a small lockup where they beat and tortured me. At eleven that night, a man with a long beard and dark glasses came and said, "You're a piece of filth." "What did I do?" I asked him. "You're not telling us where you father-in-law is hiding," he replied. I answered, "I don't know the address, but if you want, I'll lead you there." He said, "What do you mean by that? Either you're lying or you're a fool."

They shoved me into a little car and we drove to my home. No one was there, of course. The Germans looted the house and then they brought me in front of a German officer, who began to beat me. I stood my ground and said that I didn't know where my father-in-law was hiding. They took me to a room, where I heard someone say to me, "If you want to work for us, you'll be able to make a lot of money." But I was thinking only of escape. Just then, the officer who'd arrested me in Salonika entered the room. He remembered me and knew that I had escaped.

They took me from there to Haidar, the central prison for people who'd been sentenced to death or banished to camps. They led me to a cellar where other Jewish prisoners were already being held. I stayed there until Passover. In the meantime, the Germans had begun to arrest Jews with the assistance of Jewish collaborators such as the Recanati brothers. There were sixty Jewish prisoners in the cellar. We were there for months.

The Germans continued to round up Jews in Athens. They ordered the chief rabbi of Athens[3] to present them with a list of the names and addresses of members of his congregation. He was clever enough to tell them that he couldn't give them the list that very day. He asked them to give him a week to do it. They gave him five days. He took advantage of the time to urge the Jews to escape. Many Jews in Athens managed to get out because of the chief rabbi's warning.

How did the Germans entrap the Jews of Athens?

The Germans gave the order for notices to be posted at the entrance of the synagogue, saying that before Passover the Jews could obtain there ten kilograms of matzo, some oil, and some sugar. Early on the morning before Passover, lots of Jews gathered there. The Germans came with twenty trucks. That's how they trapped the unsuspecting Jews.[4] They drove them from there to the central railroad station, Stanos Larissis.

Did the Germans tell you that you'd be sent from there to Auschwitz?

No, we weren't told explicitly where we would be heading. They confused and misled us. But I remember that Mr. Nehama's daughter[5] turned to me in the railroad car and said, "Don't worry, Leon!" and I answered, "What do you mean, 'Don't worry?' We're going to our deaths!"

How did you know this?

We knew it from rumors that had spread in the ghetto. I can't point to the source of the rumors but people were speaking about the terrible fate that the Germans were preparing for them.

When did the transport set out?

I don't remember the exact date. But I think we arrived [at Auschwitz] in late November.

Do you remember how you were received?

Definitely. Dr. Mengele was waiting for us there.[6] He was a young man, in his thirties. Next to him stood a woman, evidently his main assistant, and two enormous German shepherd dogs. He began a selection: *"Links, rechts, links, rechts"* ["left, right, left, right"]. The young men were made to gather on one side; the women, children, and old people were gathered on the other. I was grouped with the young men. After standing for a long time, we were ordered to sit down. A Jew from Salonika named Salvator was there; he had a German wife. He was one of the first who'd come to Auschwitz. He asked how we were.[7]

How were you selected for the Sonderkommando?

We were taken to Birkenau that very day. In Auschwitz, the main camp, there was a small crematorium. In fact, the extermination camp in the fullest sense of the term was Birkenau. There they led us to a barracks; I don't remember its number. They quarantined us there. Afterwards, we had the numbers tattooed onto our arms.

Would you allow me to glance at the number on your arm?

Sure, go right ahead. Look—one hundred eighty-two thousand four hundred ninety-two. That was my number in Birkenau. It was my "new name." In the quarantine block, five men slept on one bunk. A few days later, some friends warned us not to join the Sonderkommando. They said that if we were forced to work there, we'd be murdered after a few months. Whoever went to the Sonderkommando had almost no chance of surviving. The Germans had no interest in preserving the lives of the eyewitnesses to their crimes.

Who warned you about the Sonderkommando?

Jews who worked near the crematoria and saw what was going on. One of them was a Jewish doctor.

Did they explain what the term "Sonderkommando" meant?

Yes, of course, in minute detail. They told us that whoever was assigned to the Sonderkommando would never get out of there alive.

We spent a month in the quarantine barracks. One day, a German visited the barracks with a Jewish doctor who was to "examine" the prisoners. Since I was fluent in German, my comrades chose me to be the interpreter. I walked over to the doctors and asked them not to take us for the Sonderkommando.

A few days later a young German, a French speaker about thirty years old, came over. He spoke with the Blockälteste. The next day he approached me and asked, "You speak French, don't you?" I told him that I did and asked him what he wanted from me. Then he told me that he needed two hundred strong men to do loading work at the train station. I told them that the Greek Jews in the barracks, about two hundred men in all, could do the work. They were fit for any kind of hard work.

Obviously I believed him; I really did think he was referring to ordinary physical labor. I thought that if we demonstrated to the Germans our strength and our ability to get things done, they'd treat us well. How naïve we were back then! The man said he'd be back the next day and left. We had to get ready to march out. When I returned to my Greek friends and told them about what the young German had demanded, they asked me what kind of work we'd have to do. I calmed them and told them that we'd stay together and that we'd be fed.

The man returned the next day and said, "All the Greeks—follow me!" There were about 150 of us. It was exactly a month after we'd been quarantined. When we left the barracks, the German asked, "You know how to sing? Why aren't you singing something?" So we burst into song. There were always songs that we loved to sing together—Greek folk songs, patriotic songs, or other songs. We were still in a positive frame of mind.

He led us through the camp until we came to Block 13.[8] The Germans opened the door to the barracks and ordered us to go in. We all went in. Inside, there were already some other prisoners. They asked us, "Why have you come here?" We told them that we'd come to help them with their work at the train station. One of them responded, "You idiots! This is the Sonderkommando. What train are you dreaming about?" I was so shocked and afraid that I froze on the spot. The prisoner said, "They tricked you. Believe me, this is the Sonderkommando." So they'd deceived us into joining the Sonderkommando. Later on, the prisoner turned out to be our *Blockälteste,* George.

Did you men protest when you heard about this? Did you try to reverse this grisly decree?

Protest? To whom? After we reached the barracks, the Germans locked the door on us and that was that.

From then on, then, you were part of the Sonderkommando.

Yes, that's how it happened. They divided the 150 Greeks among the four crematoria and the Sonderkommando chapter in our lives began.

When did you begin to work?

That very night. When we reached our "workplace," the Germans divided us into groups, five men in each group. When someone in my group saw what the work consisted of—cremating dead Jews—he threw himself into the flames. He couldn't bear the thought of having to cremate the bodies of his Jewish brethren.

Can you reconstruct the beginning of your work with the Sonderkommando?

On the first night in the barracks, the veteran crematorium prisoners told us

about the work we'd have to do. But those stories paled in comparison to the reality.

We were stunned but few of us considered suicide. That was too easy a solution. The next morning, we walked to the camp. The Germans didn't take us to the cremation facilities but rather to the cremation pits.[9] I saw several wagons next to the pits, and nearby was a building with a small gate. Later on, I found out that people were being gassed to death there. I waited outside for about half an hour and then we were ordered to open the doors.

The bodies fell out in one great mass and we began to load them onto the wagons. They were small open wagons, the kind that you find in coal mines, much smaller than railroad cars. We took the corpses to the pits. A layer of women's and children's corpses was placed in the pits, and on top of them was a layer of wood. Then a layer of men's corpses was put in, and so on, until the pit—which was at least three meters deep—was filled. Then the Germans poured gasoline into the pit. A bright flame rose from the mixture of bodies and wood.

What did you feel when you saw so many bodies, perhaps for the first time in your life?

What can I tell you? It was terrifying. I can't describe it in words. Just terrible.

So you worked at the cremation pits at first.

That's right.

And later on?

Later on they assigned me to work at the crematoria themselves. First, I was taken to Crematorium III [IV].[10]

How long did you stay there?

Three days. I had to leave after I had a run-in with the Blockälteste. That brought me to Crematorium II [III], where I stayed until the end.

Can you describe the building?

Yes. It was a very long building. In the basement were the undressing hall and, behind it, the gas chamber, which looked like a shower room in every respect. To get to the undressing hall, you had to go down fifteen steps.

Can you describe the chamber?

Yes. It was very long. I think it was more than fifty meters long and six meters wide.

How many people could the chamber hold?

Lots. Hundreds of people. After they undressed, they were taken straight to the gas chamber.

Were the Sonderkommando men in the undressing hall all the time?

Yes. One group of Sonderkommando prisoners waited for the victims in the undressing hall. Their job was to calm the people down when they showed signs of agitation, which they did now and then. The whole process was supposed to take place quietly, without excitement and riots. The Germans couldn't tolerate that.

How many Sonderkommando prisoners were in the undressing hall?

About fifteen.

Did you warn the Jews that they were in a trap and that in a few moments they'd be gassed to death in the room next door?

Are you out of your mind?! To tell people such a thing? How could I tell people that they were about to be murdered? It was impossible to tell anyone this terrible truth. You have to realize that the system was too sophisticated for us to interfere in any way. The people were doomed to die and we couldn't do a thing about it. The Germans lied in the cruelest ways. We had no choice but to do as we were told. What else could we do? What could we have changed even if we had warned the people? No one had a chance of survival, neither heads of families nor their family members. No one survived. Escape was impossible. I repeat—impossible.

Was there no point in the process leading up to the murder that you could warn the victims? Couldn't you have told them that they were walking to their death?

Absolutely not. We were never left alone, even for a moment. The Germans circulated there all the time. They were the ones who'd ordered us to mislead the victims. Anyone who'd dared to tell the Jews the truth would have been murdered straight away. That is exactly what the Germans were afraid of: that chaos would erupt, a riot would break out, and the quiet process would be disrupted.

Just the same, did the Sonderkommando prisoners ever speak briefly with the victims?

Yes. In the short time they had left, people asked various questions, such as, "Where will we be sent after the disinfection? What plans do the Germans have for us?"—simple questions from people who have no idea what's going to happen to them a few minutes later.

Were they always the same questions?

Always: "Where will they take us afterwards?" "What's next?" Questions that anyone would ask. We answered that they'd be disinfected and then they'd get their clothes and possessions back and be put to work. We gave answers like those and others. I think we had no choice but to answer that way, because the idea was to dispel their fear of the unknown.

Do you think that the victims believed the Sonderkommando prisoners?

I think most of them believed us. At least, that was my impression.

Do you remember a case where somebody doubted the answers or noticed something amiss?

No. Few of them imagined that they were about to die in such a cruel and imminent way. The young people were wary, but generally speaking, the people believed what they were told—at least outwardly.

Can you remember any difference between the behavior of religious Jews and that of non-religious Jews when they were ordered to undress?

In my opinion, there was no difference.

How long did the people stay in the undressing hall?

About twenty minutes, sometimes half an hour.

Did you have to goad them to undress faster?

No, usually it wasn't necessary. After the orders were given, we had to make sure that the atmosphere in the room was tranquil. We had to make the victims feel confident and make sure not to frighten them. That was the policy; it was meant to ensure that they'd walk into the gas chamber, which was camouflaged by means of fake showerheads, quietly and calmly. In the same context, I have to say that whenever the undressing didn't take place quickly enough, the Germans prodded them to move faster by saying, "Los, los! Schnell, schnell!" ["Move it, move it! Fast, fast!"].[11]

First the women and children undressed and went on to the gas chamber. Then it was the men's turn. The door of the gas chamber was opened again and the men were pushed in.

What can you tell me about the gas chamber?

I saw the gas chamber quite often. I entered it personally—after the gassing was over, of course. It was an especially repugnant job.

What did the gas chamber look like?

Like a shower room. The showerheads looked real, the whole scene was very realistic. Everyone who went in was convinced that they were about to take a shower and that the whole thing was for disinfection.

How many people could be pushed into the gas chamber?

At Crematorium I [II]—as many as two thousand.

What color were the walls of the gas chamber?

Somewhere between gray and white.

What was the floor of the gas chamber made of?

The whole floor was concrete. In the corners there were channels for the water to drain away, or so it seemed, so that the deception would be perfect.

It must have been terribly cold there in the winter . . .

In the winter, they put big iron stoves in the gas chamber so that the people wouldn't freeze when they went in.

Did I understand you correctly? Did you say that the women and children went in first and waited there?

After the women and children undressed, they entered the gas chamber and waited behind a locked door. Then the men were brought in. Therefore, they were all together as they waited for the "shower" or the "disinfection."

Was there lighting in the gas chamber?

Yes, the chamber had lighting. In the cold seasons, as I said, it even had heat. That way, the women and children could wait there until the men came.

What happened after the men joined the women and the children in the gas chamber?

We noticed some disquiet.

Why?

The reason, I think, was that the people sensed that something was wrong. Maybe they'd asked the Germans and noticed that no water was coming out of the showerheads. Once I heard someone complain in this manner to the German who stood there. The German answered with fake innocence, "Really? No water? I'll take it up with Fritz. Please wait!" A few minutes later, additional Germans came, locked the door, and it was all over.

Was the process always carried out in the same order?

The women and children always came first, followed by the men. Sometimes long lines formed, since the transports brought thousands of Jews and clogged up all the crematoria.

What happened after all the people were crammed into the gas chamber?

The SS men with their canisters of gas came. They opened the windows in the ceiling of the room and poured in the gas, which looked like blue-green pebbles. This was always done, without exception, by the Germans and not by the Sonderkommando prisoners.

I remember that Sonderkommando men were called over on one occasion to open up the windows, which were covered with heavy concrete lids. Tubes led down from the openings into the gas chamber, and I took the opportunity to get a close look at the canisters of gas. The Germans who threw the gas in wore gas masks and took them off only after the lid had been closed.

After the gassing process began, did you hear voices or sounds from the gas chamber?

Of course. We heard loud screaming. Everyone screamed in the gas chamber, since they were totally desperate. Now they realized that death was approaching, so they shouted for help. I can hear the screaming to this day. It will hound me for the rest of my life. It will never go away.

What did you feel as you heard the people screaming as they suffocated?

I've got to tell you something that's terrible but true: we'd become robots by

then. We couldn't expose ourselves to the intensity of the emotions that we experienced in the course of the work. Really, a human being cannot endure the emotions that were part and parcel of our work. Once we'd repressed the emotions and felt like "normal people," we could treat everything that happened as "work" that we had to do in accordance with the Germans' orders. That's how it was. We didn't think about the horrifying aspect of our work and didn't allow any emotions to intrude. We didn't have any emotions whatsoever. We stifled them before they could emerge.

What did you men do in the undressing hall while the people were suffocating in the chamber next door?

We had to do lots of things. We gathered up the clothing that the people had left behind and we packed up the bundles that they'd brought from home. We had to put everything in one place so that it could be taken away.

But hadn't the people been forced to leave all their belongings on the Auschwitz railroad platform?

That's right. Yes, those things were taken away by the "Kanada" Kommando. But people took a few things with them on their way to the gas chamber. The "Kanada" Kommando men gathered up the belongings and sorted them—shoes, eyeglasses, suitcase, and so on. They sent it all to a place in Birkenau that was also called "Kanada." There the clothing was disinfected and everything else was sorted again so that anything useful would be sent to Germany.

Did the people also bring food with them?

Yes, of course. This was important for us. They brought many kinds of food that we could use. I still remember finding goose fat, among other things, in a transport of Hungarian Jews. Each transport brought foodstuffs that we could use. It wasn't just food: I remember Hungarian Jews bringing a Torah scroll into the undressing hall.

What happened while the people were in the gas chamber?

The Germans waited fifteen minutes and then looked in to make sure that everyone had died. The moment they were sure that this had happened, they gave the order to start up the ventilation system in the gas chamber.

Where were you while the people were suffocating in the gas chamber?

I was usually in the undressing hall.

Did you also remove corpses from the gas chamber?

No. That was done by a group that did that job and nothing else.

What happened to the bodies after they were removed from the gas chamber?

An elevator took them up to the ground floor, over the gas chambers.

Do you remember the elevator?

It was a very simple elevator: a slab of sorts, open on all sides, a metal surface on which they loaded the corpses. It was an electric elevator. The bodies were placed on the loading surface and then the elevator went up.

How many bodies were loaded each time?

Fifteen to twenty. As soon as the loading began, I went up to the ground floor. That was my regular workplace.

Could you get to the ground floor from inside the building?

No, I used the stairs on the outside.

How long did you work in each shift?

Twelve hours—from six A.M. to six P.M. or six P.M. to six A.M.

What did you have to do?

Before they threw the bodies into the furnaces, I had to examine the mouths of the people who'd been murdered and rip out their gold teeth. The Germans made one of the prisoners do this work so they wouldn't lose the gold.

Were you equipped with appropriate tools for the job?

Yes. I had two different pairs of pliers to pull out the teeth, not ordinary pliers but real dentist's pliers.

The kind that are used in dental clinics?

Yes. I must say that it was a terrible, ghastly job. The bodies gave off an unbearable stench.

Didn't they have a sarcastic name for your job?

They called me and the others who did similar jobs *Dentisten* [dental technicians].

Who called you that?

The Blockälteste, I think.

It was a derisive name, wasn't it?

Yes, of course. The Germans also called me the "Greek dentist."

Where did you do your work?

On the ground floor, about three meters from the furnaces.

What happened after you finished the job?

A signal to throw the corpses into the furnace was given. I had to signal the people to throw the corpses in. The key word was "Einschieben!" ["Push in!"] Every action had its own name. The people in charge of stuffing corpses into the furnaces did their work skillfully. They picked up the corpses, placed them on a little stretcher, and pushed them through the furnace door that way.

Did you also give the "Einschieben" order?

Yes. Sometimes I gave the order; sometimes the Germans gave it. It was given automatically every half-hour.

Why every half-hour?

Because that's how long it took to cremate the corpses. During that time,

more corpses were taken to the ground floor and I had to continue pulling their teeth.

So you had only half an hour to pull out the gold teeth.

No, less. Only ten minutes.

How many corpses are you talking about?

Let's see. I have to count . . . Sixty to seventy-five corpses in ten minutes.

How could you pull out teeth from so many bodies so quickly?

It's definitely possible. You pry the body's mouth open, look in, and if there aren't any gold teeth you go onto the next body, and so on. Sometimes it went very fast.

Please tell me exactly how you did your work.

The bodies were prostrate on the floor. First I had to open their mouths. I had to use force to accomplish that. The mouths were tightly closed, so I had to force them open with the pliers. Whenever I noticed a gold tooth, I pulled it out with the second pair of pliers. I used dentist's pliers to do this. The moment I noticed a gold tooth, I ripped it out with the pliers. We also pulled out false teeth.

The first time you had to do this, you must have thought that you wouldn't be able to bear it.

Bear it or not, I had to do the work. It was repulsive but I did it. You've got to realize that there was no way to evade it. When I was at Birkenau, sometimes there was a break between one transport and the next. During that time, we had to clean the furnaces. Once the Germans found two gold teeth in the ashes while the cleaning was going on. Do you know what they did to me? They flogged me ten times on the ass, using a strap that had pieces of metal embedded in it. They accused me of sabotage and said that I'd better not to do it again.

After you pulled the gold teeth, how long was it until the other Sonderkommando prisoners took the bodies to the furnaces?

Whenever I finished one row of bodies, the German gave the "Einschieben" order. That was the signal to put the bodies into the furnaces.

Who trained you for your work?

I acquired my experience on the job. Believe me, I was nervous and very tense at first. I thought I wouldn't be able to do the job right and that the Germans wouldn't forgive me if I made a mistake. In other words, I thought they'd kill me if I overlooked as much as a single gold tooth. But eventually I got so good at it that I could tell which body in which row had gold teeth, a bridge, or what have you. Over time, I became an expert.

What did you do after you'd accumulated a certain quantity of gold teeth?

I collected them in little pouches in the sides of my boots. Then we called

Schwartz, whom we'd nicknamed the "Minister of Finance" because it was his job to melt down the gold teeth, pour them into ingots that were two centimeters wide and five to six centimeters long, and hand them to the Germans.

Who was Schwartz? A German?

No, he was one of the Sonderkommando prisoners. He had a little laboratory. He cleaned the gold and separated it from what remained of the organic matter until only pure gold was left. Afterwards, he poured the ingots and gave them to the Germans. When I found an especially large gold tooth, I kept it for myself. After all, I had to live, too, didn't I?

What did you do with the gold?

I usually gave it to an SS man who visited me each night. He asked me what I wanted and brought it to me the next day. I usually asked for spirits or special kinds of food. He took the gold, returned the next morning with a bag containing the things that I'd ordered, and said, "If you please, sir."

He called you "sir"?

Yes, or he called me "the Greek."

Didn't he call you by your serial number?

Absolutely not.

Did this German come every day?

Every day.

Always the same German?

Yes, always the same German.

What standard of measurement did you use in these deals?

It depended on the size of the pieces of gold that I found. Sometimes they were little and sometimes they were larger. Whatever, he always did as I asked. For the most part, he brought chicken, spirits, cookies, and other delicacies.

I see that the Sonderkommando and the Germans conducted a lively commerce of sorts. When did it begin?

It went on from the very start. Once one of the SS men visited me and asked if I had something for him. I gave him some gold. What else could I do?

Where you afraid of him?

No. What more could he do to me? I was doomed to die in any case, if not today, then tomorrow. That's how it was there. After he took the gold, the German asked, "Do you want something good to eat? Or maybe some alcohol to drink?"

Do you know how much gold we collected there in Auschwitz? According to my calculations, we produced tons of gold for the Germans, all from the slaughtered Jews.

Did the Sonderkommando prisoners and the Germans have an agreement about what could and could not be done?

Yes. I'll give you an example: when the Germans wanted something, they told us to steal it. We had to do it carefully. "Take care not to get caught! If they catch you, you'll get shot." We called it "organizing." When the Germans wanted me to steal something from the victims' belongings for them, they'd say, "Organize it for me."

How could you work with those bodies day after day? How did you endure it?

By the second day I was already working like an automaton, emotionlessly. Sometimes I had to help load bodies into the furnace and open the doors of the furnaces at the crematorium.

How was this done?

I used my cap to open the doors of the furnaces. They were sizzling hot.

Did you take part in loading bodies in your spare time only, or regularly?

Only when I had spare time. That's when they asked me to open the furnace doors. When I wasn't able to help out, one of the stretcher carriers opened the door. But sometimes the bodies were so heavy that they couldn't open the furnace doors without my help. I just opened the doors; all the rest—loading the bodies into the furnace—was done by the others.

How many bodies were placed in the furnace?

Three to five. It depended on the condition of the bodies. When they weren't fat, we managed to put four or five bodies into a furnace. The bodies were arranged in a pattern of three men and two women, since the women were fatter. Every half-hour, new bodies were placed in the five furnaces. Each furnace had three doors and the bodies were loaded through them. A special group of workers did the loading.

All the workers in that group were very strong. They used a stretcher that looked like the kind used to carry sick people. It was made of metal. There were two handles in the front of the stretcher, on both sides. The moment the loading order was given, the bodies were placed on the stretcher. The workers grabbed the stretcher by its handles and opened the door of the furnace, where the temperature was high. Two men held the stretcher and lifted it to the furnace door. A third man pushed the bodies into the furnace from behind, using a metal pole. And then they closed the door.

Was it a time-consuming process?

No. Sadly, it didn't take long. We were really professional. It was all over within five minutes. Every half-hour we had to load new bodies into the furnace. The whole thing happened automatically. Each cremation facility had several furnaces, so between fifty and seventy-five bodies could be cremated every half-hour. This went on twenty-four hours a day.

You said that the men who loaded the bodies were very strong. How could somebody stay strong under the conditions of Auschwitz?

Unlike the other Auschwitz prisoners, we were not undernourished. We were the Sonderkommando; we had plenty of food. We searched among the things that the people had brought to Auschwitz and found all sorts of food. Sometimes we found real delicacies: salami, bacon, even caviar. All we had to do was reach out and gorge ourselves.

In other words, you had no nutrition problems?

As long as the transports kept coming, the Sonderkommando prisoners had no nutrition problems.

How many hours did you work each day?

Twelve hours, nonstop. After the shift was over, we had to shower because we were absolutely filthy. We were given a piece of soap and were also allowed to change our clothes. In the summer, we went to the yard of the building and sat on the lawn. In the winter, we went to the rooms in the loft.

After the shift was over, were you able to do whatever you pleased?

Yes, we could do whatever we pleased, as long as we didn't leave the area of the crematorium building, of course.

What did you do after six P.M.?

We talked and talked. I remember a man named Strassvogel. As we were sitting in the yard during a break, he asked me to go to Paris after the liberation — should I be lucky enough — and look for his wife. After the liberation, I was on my way to the United States and had to make a stopover in Paris. There weren't enough ships at the time and it wasn't easy to get there. Be that as it may, I managed to track down his daughter. In her apartment I saw a photo portrait of her father. She asked me if we'd been friends in Auschwitz. "Yes," I answered. She showed me around Paris and asked me to stay. But since I was already married, I couldn't hang around there for long.

Where were your living quarters?

Upstairs, on the second floor. We had real beds there.

Was the room heated in the winter?

It wasn't necessary. The heat from the furnaces downstairs kept the whole building warm.

Did you sleep on bunks, like the other prisoners?

No, we had real beds.

Did you have roll calls there?

Sure we did. Before we went out to work, we had to report every morning for roll call. The order they gave was "Antreten!" ["come over here!"].

Every day you saw Jews going into the gas chamber and not coming out again. How did you put up with the work?

What would you do if you were in my shoes? Look, I didn't have a choice. I couldn't behave differently. During that time we had no emotions. We were totally drained. We blocked up our hearts; we were dehumanized. We worked like machines. We were human beings devoid of human emotion. We were really animals, not people. It's frightening but that's how it was—a tragedy.

Being in contact with so many dead people could drive the most stable individual out of his mind. How did you maintain your sanity?

Well, as I already told you, none of us went insane in Auschwitz since we'd stopped being people. We'd become robots.

Did you ever consider suicide?

No, I knew it wouldn't help a soul. Once I spoke with an SS man who worked with us. He was older than the others. He said, "Don't worry. You'll get out of here and go on living for a long time." I asked him, "Are there many Jews remaining whom we'll have to cremate?" He laughed and said, "Mark my words. You have a long life ahead of you. There are rumors that the Russians are approaching the gates of Auschwitz."

Did you interact with non-Jews in the camp?

We interacted with some non-Jewish Poles who worked in the camp. Sometimes they helped us. We thought and hoped that they'd help us with the planned uprising.

Whose idea was the uprising?

If I'm not mistaken, it was the idea of a Russian prisoner of war who worked in the Sonderkommando of Crematorium I [II]. The idea was conceived in early 1944. The Russians had military experience that might be useful in an uprising.

How did you prepare for the uprising?

As we organized the uprising, specific tasks were given to anyone who was going to take part in it. We each knew what we had to do. Assignments were given not only to the Sonderkommando prisoners but also to other prisoners in Birkenau, such as members of the "Kanada" Kommando. The people who worked in the steam facilities were supposed to start a fire and touch off an explosion the moment the Germans came near. The Sonderkommando men were to kill as many SS men as possible. Each prisoner in every squad knew exactly what he was supposed to do and prepared for it. I remember the date that was originally chosen for the uprising—August 15, 1944.[12]

A few days before that, some non-Jewish rebels from the main camp, Auschwitz, came to us and said, "You'd better hold off. The Russians are at the gate." So we, the prisoners of Birkenau, decided to postpone the uprising. At that time, there were fifty thousand prisoners in the women's camp in addition to fifty thousand prisoners in the men's camp.[13] When we were told about the

Russians advance, the organizers of the uprising, none other than the Sonderkommando prisoners, decided to wait. In other words, the postponement was mainly due to the influence of the non-Jewish leaders of the uprising.[14] Kaminski, one of the leaders of the uprising, announced that there was no choice but to postpone the beginning of the action. Some time later, the Germans began to suspect Kaminski of taking part in a resistance organization. He was taken to the "Kanada" area and tortured. He didn't reveal a thing and didn't denounce any of the comrades.[15]

So the Germans knew that resistance activity was taking place.

Apparently so. Maybe they'd obtained information of some kind.

Did you also take part in the planned uprising?

Definitely. Each of us had something to do.

Did you have weapons?

No, except for some hand grenades that had been brought from the camp. My job was to set fire to the crematorium building where I worked, after the people in Crematorium I [II] gave the signal. Since we had nothing to start the fire with, it was decided that I'd set the mattresses on fire once I received the signal. So that was my job according to the plan.

Did the uprising take place as planned?

Unfortunately, it did not, first of all because the others, the non-Jewish resistance people in Auschwitz, did not cooperate with us. They stuck to the excuse that "Look, the Russians are coming; how stupid it would be to get murdered by the Germans just now, with liberation at hand." They simply didn't want to cooperate with us. In the end, we lost our patience because we didn't see deliverance coming from their direction. Instead, we decided to prepare for the next opportune moment without expecting support from the people in Auschwitz.

On October 7, 1944, they informed us that the Germans intended to remove the Sonderkommando men from Crematorium III [IV]. We knew what that meant: they were going to murder them. We figured that it was time for action. We got in touch with the various underground groups.[16]

A little before 10:30, the Russian Sonderkommando prisoners gave all the resistance groups the word: we were to start the uprising that very day. Shortly before two, the Germans were supposed to liquidate a transport of Sonderkommando prisoners from Crematorium III [IV]. So they turned up beforehand and ordered the men to report for head count. It was clear what the results of the head count would be.

When the Greeks in the Sonderkommando heard the order to report for head count, they gave the code to start the uprising. With that signal, the Sonderkommando uprising broke out. A few of our men attacked the Ger-

mans, grabbed their weapons, and began to escape. Another group cut the barbed wire fence that surrounded the crematorium compound. Others set fire to the mattresses on the second floor, where the men had their living quarters. A few men raced to the nearby crematorium building. The Germans called for reinforcements and began to fire automatic weapons in every direction.

When the siren[17] went off in the camp, reinforcements poured in from all around. The whole crematorium went up in flames. I should mention one of the rebels at Crematorium III [IV]: Marcel Nadjari, a good man. In the meantime, the men at Crematorium I [II] saw the flames bursting from Crematorium III [IV] and began to run away. They realized that the uprising was at its peak. By that time, they'd managed to throw their cruel Kapo into the fire.[18] Unfortunately, they were all captured in the forest nearby[19] and were executed right there. We—the men of the Crematorium II [III]—didn't do a thing during the uprising[20] because we hadn't received any instructions. We were waiting for someone to give us instructions, but we couldn't establish contact with the other rebels due to the conditions that day.

After the uprising died down, the Germans assembled all the Sonderkommando prisoners who were still alive. They told us that since we hadn't taken part in the uprising we wouldn't be punished. That's how the men of Crematorium II [III], myself included, survived. In the meantime, the Germans brought the bodies of our comrades from Crematorium I [II] who'd been shot for having dared to escape. They ordered us to cremate their bodies.

How long after the uprising did you continue to work in the Sonderkommando?

I worked in the Sonderkommando until January 1945. But in late October they'd received orders to stop the exterminations in the gas chambers.[21]

How did you leave Auschwitz?

The Germans wanted to raze Birkenau to the ground before they left. They wanted to wipe out all traces of the crimes that had been committed there. To do this, they brought in a demolition expert and began to lay dynamite at the sites of the murders, the crematoria and the gas chambers. All the prisoners were ordered to dig pits in the crematorium compounds in order to prepare places for the dynamite. We also had to pile up the bricks from the smokestacks and the walls that had fallen in after the explosions. At that time, we returned to Block 13.

On January 16, 1945, there was a rumor that the Russians were at the gates of Auschwitz. I remember that we were ordered to assemble at an isolated barracks. We realized immediately that the Germans wanted an opportunity to wipe us out before they locked the gates of the camp and left the place behind. We were determined to act quickly to save our lives. The idea was to

mingle among the other prisoners who were leaving Birkenau. All the prisoners were ordered to move to Auschwitz. Each one took up as much food as he could. That's how we marched as the Germans commanded.

Where did the Germans take the prisoners after they left Auschwitz?

To Mauthausen.

Did you return to your country of birth after the liberation?

Yes, I returned to Salonika and spent some time there.

Were you troubled by memories of Auschwitz after the liberation?

Yes, it took me a long time to begin to recover. For six months after I'd left Auschwitz, I couldn't do a thing. I couldn't close my eyes at night; I had nightmares all the time. I woke up at night screaming in agony at the sound of Jews crying out as they were being suffocated in the gas chambers. The screaming, the groaning, the prayers of those people. In my dreams, I heard the sound of the elevator that brought the corpses up to the furnaces.

I'd like to tell you something weird: in the initial period after my liberation, whenever people looked at me or whenever I talked to someone, I almost automatically looked at the speaker and examined his mouth. I wanted to see if he had gold teeth. Can you believe that? I'd become an automaton. When someone had false teeth, I could tell from far away.

How long did this last?

At least a year. Auschwitz was the tragedy of my life! It wasn't easy to liberate myself from the experiences that I'd had there. At first, I couldn't start life over. It was a lengthy process to return to life and "leave" Auschwitz behind me.

Did you tell anybody in your family about the work that you'd done in Auschwitz?

Only my wife and my mother-in-law. I couldn't tell the rest of my family.

Leon, are you still troubled by memories of Birkenau?

Definitely. The memories keep coming back and I can't do a thing about it. It's impossible to fight them. They return again and again and I can't stop them. The memories and the long months that I'd spent there destroyed my health. My physical condition today is really bad. It pains me to say that no one shows any interest in my condition and no one is doing anything so that I can get the rights I'm entitled to as a Holocaust survivor.

When you saw how the Germans were murdering Jews in Birkenau continually, did you believe that any Jews would survive the exterminations?

I hoped that some Jews would survive somewhere in the world. I was sure that the war would end at some point. I had a chance to converse a little with a man who'd been on one of the transports. I asked him, "Do you believe the Germans will ever have to atone for their crimes?" He answered, "What a

naïve question. I'll tell you something and don't you forget it!: The situation is like a grocery store where the owner gives the customers credit. He writes down their debts in a ledger. One day, some ink may spill on his records and no one will be able to figure them out anymore. The debts will be wiped out forever. That's how it'll be with the Germans. They'll do everything to cover up their crimes. In a few more years, hardly anything will be known about Auschwitz. Slowly Auschwitz will disappear from the public consciousness. The world won't even be particularly interested in the fate of the Jews. The disaster will fade away. The Germans' crimes will be forgotten. The whole thing will disappear."

That's what a smart Jew said a few minutes before he was murdered by Zyklon B gas in Crematorium II [III].

8

Ya'akov Silberberg: "One Day in the Crematorium Felt Like a Year"

If proof were needed that even in the very embodiment of hell on earth, the crematoria of Birkenau, the Germans did not manage to destroy or even scratch the Jewish psyche, one may find it in the face of Ya'akov (Yankl) Silberberg, and especially in his smile—a guileless smile as pure as that of an innocent baby. Today, having fathered two children and become the grandchildren of four, he maintains the innocence of his childhood in Zakroczym, Poland. Nevertheless, Ya'akov's work in the Sonderkommando did change something inside him: he lost his faith in God. Originally a yeshiva student from a family of *kohanim*, descendants of the Jewish priesthood—hence the common Jewish name "Cohen"—he has abandoned the faith and the ultra-Orthodox way of life that he had experienced in his parent's home.

This displacement from the world of faith—"but not from religion," he states with emphasis—is his way of indicting the Creator of the Universe. It is only one of the crises that Ya'akov has endured. He is the offspring of a large family, of which only remnants survived the Holocaust. Since he was liberated from Auschwitz, and especially since he resettled in Israel, his life has been an ongoing effort to unburden himself of the horrors of the Holocaust and to neutralize their harsh effect.

From his very first days in the Sonderkommando, he experienced spiritual and religious turmoil and attempted to do the undoable—to "desert" the

ranks of his labor company. First he consulted with a *dayan* (a rabbinical judge) from Makow, Lajb Langfus, who was with him in the Sonderkommando, and who trawled the Jewish sources for quotations that might quell the misgivings of a devoted Jew whose world had collapsed before his eyes.

Thus, burdened by severe moral quandaries, Ya'akov, then a young adult, tried to evade his Sonderkommando duties as best he could.

The heavy residue of the Holocaust is perceptible in the modest apartment of Lowa and Ya'akov Silberberg in Holon, who attempt to overcome the nightmare that was Auschwitz in their own separate ways.

Lowa, born in Lodz, also went through Auschwitz. The suffering and agony inflicted on her during her time in the ghetto and the camp continue to this day. The couple have striven to spare their children the misery of those memories, and have definitely succeeded. Their two children, Yitzhak (Icho) and Ruhaleh, are a source of staunch support for their parents and the objects of justified pride. They are a happy family that Nazi Germany did not succeed in reducing to defeat and despair.

Ya'akov has managed to endure despite all tribulations and tries to sustain and conserve his strength. Fortune has not smiled on him since the liberation; he has experienced a perpetual series of illnesses and hardships—his own, his wife's, his children's—but he has remained strong, jovial, and good-hearted. "I can't hate a soul," he whispers in my ear even in the painful context of a fellow Sonderkommando prisoner who failed to meet the moral expectations that Ya'akov harbored with all his might at the time. When I press him to condemn the man's behavior in the crematoria of Birkenau, Ya'akov excuses himself by blurting out, "I'm not one to judge."

In our many meetings, Ya'akov repeatedly uttered one unforgettable sentence that expresses his pent-up feelings in the aftermath of the Holocaust: "If all the trees in the world became pens and all the oceans turned into rivers of ink, one could not write down and fully document what happened in the Holocaust." Who would know this better than he?

Just the same, after everything that he has undergone, he expresses no bitterness, makes no complaints, lodges no charges, and articulates no resentment. He is at peace with himself, his family, and those around him. His inner serenity is evident. Ya'akov, born in 1918, a self-defined "simple Jew" and now an octogenarian, entered Birkenau and left it the same man that he had always been: a saint.

What do you remember about your childhood and teenage years?

I was born in Zakroczym,[1] not far from Warsaw, on January 17, 1918. My family was staunchly *haredi* [ultra-Orthodox]. We were *kohanim*. My pater-

nal grandfather was a Gerrer hasid who visited the court of the Gerrer Rebbe every now and then to meet with him. He was a grain merchant. My maternal grandfather had a bakery. My father was a yeshiva student who devoted his time to study. He went to shul in the morning and immersed himself in study until late at night. After he'd done this for years, grandfather—he was very old by then—called him over and advised him to learn a trade so that he could support his family. He suggested that my father do as he had done and become a baker.

How many children were there apart from you?

I was the oldest, and I had a brother Yechezkel, about fifteen years old, and two sisters, Chaya-Chayke, about seventeen, and Bayla-Bella, who was about ten.[2] Chaya survived Auschwitz and died a few years ago. Bayla-Bella was murdered together with my mother, grandmother, and brother in Auschwitz.

I attended a heder (religious preschool for boys) and went to shul every day. I was very religious—haredi, as they call it today. At home we kept the commandments and celebrated all the observances and festivals.

What language did you speak at home?

Mainly Yiddish and a little Hebrew.

What do you remember about your family's living conditions?

We lived in one room.

The whole family lived in one room?

Yes, and later Grandmother also moved in. There was no running water; we drew water from a well with a pump and pulley; we filled pails and took them home. We shared an outdoor toilet with the neighbors.

Was the Zionist idea accepted in your family?

Father really wanted to make aliya [move to Eretz Israel]. . . . He was active in the Mizrachi [religious Zionist] movement and made donations to the Jewish National Fund. There were important Zionist activists in our community.

And yourself?

I was interested. Once I went to Warsaw with a friend to hear Zeev Jabotinsky. Once I went to the Mizrachi "kibbutz" [collective training farm] because I'd heard that they were about to receive "certificates" [immigration visas to Palestine] from the Mandate government. But in the end I didn't manage to get one.

What public institutions did your town have?

There was a *mikve* [ritual bath], a library, an auditorium, and the whole gamut of youth movements, from Ha-shomer ha-tsa'ir, through the Bund, to Betar.

What about religious institutions?

We had one synagogue where there was also a heder, a Talmud Torah, a *beit*

midrash [religious study center] and several small synagogues for the Hasidim. Our rabbi, whom I remember well, was Rabbi Srebrenik,[3] an impressive man with a total command of Torah. To this day I remember his sermons on the weekly Torah portion.

Did the people around you read newspapers?

Haynt[4] and *Moment*.[5]

What do you remember about the first days of the occupation?

I was not in Zakroczym at the time. After my father taught me the baking trade, I moved in with my uncle in Sochaczew.[6] He had a bakery and I worked for him until the war began. I wanted to work and make money.

After the Germans entered Sochaczew, they took me to Germany, to somewhere near the town of Gubin, and kept me in a tent camp for about a half a year. It was winter. We didn't work; we really didn't do a thing. We received the bread rations that the Germans gave us. Most of the people in the camp were Jewish.

From there they moved us to the Warsaw ghetto. We lived on Gesia Street. This was in late 1941 or early 1942. Afterwards, I tried to escape and cross the border between the Reich and the *Generalgouvernement* (the German-administered part of Poland that was not annexed to the Reich). They put me in a labor camp near Grajewo for about half a year.

After I was released from the camp, I went to Plonsk.[7] I had relatives there and the girl whom I would eventually marry, Luba Pszozowski, also lived there. I met her when I came to Plonsk to work for my uncle. She was a Beth Jacob girl, about twenty years old.

The Jews in Plonsk had already been placed in a ghetto. My family was there, too. Father was no longer alive; one day the Germans came and took him away, and he did not come back. In the ghetto I worked in the bakery that provided the ghetto with bread. The Germans gave us the flour. My wife became pregnant while we were in the ghetto.

It was horrible in the Plonsk ghetto. There were severe shortages and the Germans abused us terribly. There were stories about a place called Treblinka and what they were doing to the Jews there, but the Jews in the ghetto didn't want to believe it.[8]

Thanks to my job in the bakery, I was able to stay in Plonsk until the end, until the ghetto was liquidated.

When my wife became pregnant in the ghetto, she wanted to have an abortion because of the situation and wanted to go with me to the midwife. I talked her out it. We hoped the war would be over quickly. My maternal uncle, Natan (Nossan) Mejr Bierznianka, who had introduced me to my wife, also intervened in the matter.

In other words, she reached Auschwitz pregnant.

Yes, she was in her first months of pregnancy. Her mother and her two brothers were with us in the transport, and all of them were murdered there.

I did not see her in Auschwitz but I met a woman friend who survived and had been with her. She's living in Israel today. She told me about what had happened to her and where she had worked until they took her away. They took her from Auschwitz to another camp. On the ramp, they couldn't tell that she was pregnant.

Did the name Auschwitz mean anything to you before you were taken there?

No, nothing.

Were you given prior notice about the transport?

Yes. Several transports had left before ours and we knew our turn would come. One day they removed us from our homes without giving us time to pack anything. We grabbed the most essential things and we went.

Who shared the car with you in the transport to Auschwitz?

I went to Auschwitz with my mother, my wife and her family, my brother, and my two sisters, in one of the last transports from Plonsk. It was in the winter of 1942.[9] I think we went in ordinary railroad cars. I remember that my mother, may she rest in peace, took her knitting for the trip and sat in the car knitting. The chairman of the *Judenrat,* Ramek, was also in our transport.[10] He was a good man. He spared no effort to keep us together until our arrival.

On what date did you arrive?

Late 1942.

What else do you remember about your arrival in Auschwitz?

It was in the evening; you couldn't see much. We didn't understand what was happening, where we had arrived. There were very strong lights. We saw lots of Germans with dogs and prisoners with striped clothing. Afterwards, they turned out to be Jews from the "Kanada" Kommando. They hardly spoke with us. They could hardly get a word out of their mouths.

Did you try to ask them where you'd come?

We asked, but they were like mutes. They didn't answer. Afterwards, a German appeared and made the *Selektion*—left, right.

My brother Yechezkel, fifteen years old, was with me. He looked like a non-Jew, blond, a real *sheigitz* [emphatically non-Jewish in appearance]. He tried to move over to my side but the Germans wouldn't let him, so I remained by myself. It was the last time I saw him.

How did you and your brother know which line was safer?

We knew because the young, healthy people were on my side and the elderly

and the young children were on the other side. That's how we guessed what was happening.

What happened after the Selektion?

They led us to a barracks, where we received our new "name"—the number on our arm. I was given the number 84129 and I began my new life in the Auschwitz camp.

Do you remember the moment they tattooed the number?

Yes. It wasn't all that painful; they did it with needles. It was done by veteran prisoners from Czechoslovakia or France. Then they led us to the shower. They took away everything we'd brought with us and gave us camp clothing. At three in the morning they took us out for *Appell* (roll call).[11] It was very cold and some of the people couldn't endure it. The next morning, we got a quarter of a loaf of bread for "breakfast" and went to work.

At first I was assigned to a detail that was named for its commander, Schilfenmeier.[12] We built fishponds and had to work in the water in the winter. The conditions were appalling. We worked all day and came back in the evening. Each day, when we returned from work, one out of the five of us was dead. Four people brought one body for burial. . . .

How did you get yourself excused from this grueling labor detail?

After a while I began to understand the camp rules and I realized that you could switch details almost every day. That's what I did. In the morning I reported to a different detail where I met a Jew who felt sorry for me and let me in. It was the *Baukommando,* the builders' detail. It was a school of construction, and I worked there for some time. It wasn't so hard there.

My next move was to the *Bekleidungskammer,*[13] the clothing warehouse. There I had it good. The Kapo[14] liked me and appointed me *Kalifaktor,* chief cook, and I did the cooking for the Kapo and also for the SS.

I stayed in the *Bekleidungskammer* until I was assigned to the Sonderkommando. We were in Block 5 in the men's camp in Birkenau and were considered an elite.

Let me tell you more about my term of service in the *Bekleidungskammer*.

Jews sometimes escaped from the camp. Some of them were captured, brought back to the camp, and sentenced to hang. They usually did the hangings on Sundays, before or after lunch, and we all had to stand and watch how they hanged them. One of the would-be escapees was Leon Shumer of Krakow, the most courageous among those who were captured. Before they hanged him, he said in Polish, "May the survivors take revenge against the Germans." Other Poles were hanged together with him but none of them said a word.

When did you first discover that they were murdering people in Auschwitz?

Two veteran women prisoners whom I met after they'd brought us to the "Sauna"[15]—this was quite early on—told me, "In a little while you'll see smoke coming out of the chimney. The people who came together with you will go up to heaven in a little while and they'll come out through the smokestack."

Did you understand what this meant?

When I heard what they said, I began to get a rough idea.

When did they transfer you to the Sonderkommando?

At the time of the transports from Hungary. At that time, the Polish *Lagerälteste*[16] and the Jewish Kapo of the *Bekleidungskammer* got into a squabble. The *Lagerälteste* demanded something and our Kapo did not want to give it to him. Only Jews worked in the *Bekleidungskammer*. We had two Kapos, who did not get along well. Due to the quarrel, they transferred us all from the *Bekleidungskammer* to the Sonderkommando. Since conditions had been good in the *Bekleidungskammer,* we were fatter, stronger, and better dressed then the rest of the prisoners. While I was in the *Bekleidungskammer,* I'd joined the resistance and was active in it.

Who brought you in? How was the contact made?

It happened like this: a Jew from Radom named Leibl, number 32000, told me once that he needed me, that I should come to his barracks. When I reported to Leibl, he told me what was going on. He told me that I worked with people's property, that occasionally my comrades and I found all sorts of valuables, and that he needed silver. I asked him what for, and he said that they wanted to establish an underground, that they already had lots of friends, and that they needed assistance.

Apart from Leibl, who was in contact with you about underground activity in the camp?

The underground was headed by a Russian, a Russian lieutenant, Pilatov. I brought him any gold and silver that I'd found among the belongings. That's how I came into contact with him. Whenever I attended their meetings, they always told me what they intended to do. They began to prepare homemade bombs and various other items. There were lots of Jews and Russians among us. I don't remember how many Jews were in the group. I was acquainted with many of them. There were Jews from a transport from Ciechanow, some from Radom, and a few from France. One of them was named Jules; he headed the French group. He worked in the *Bekleidungskammer*. They had connections with people outside the camp.

I remember that they always told them to wait, wait, until the right time for a rebellion and uprising would come. In the meantime, they helped prisoners

who had to escape from the camp. That's how it was at the time . . . This was before I joined the Sonderkommando.

You said before that something happened in your labor detail that prompted the authorities to transfer you to the Sonderkommando.

That's right. Lots of transports were coming from Hungary at the time. They were large transports and the workload was building up. There weren't enough people to work on the ramp and in the crematoria. But there was another reason, too. The *Lagerälteste* was angry at the Kapo of our *Bekleidungskammer* and decided to remove us. One night they declared a *Blocksperre*[17] and he took us away. Since we were stronger than other prisoners, he assigned all the *Bekleidungskammer* people to the Sonderkommando.

What happened when you joined the Sonderkommando? I'm referring to the first moments, the first hours.

What I can tell you? The Sonderkommando was something terrible. When I went in the first night and saw the bodies . . . and the furnaces burning . . . I went there and right away I saw this scene: The large, long room where the people undressed was full of corpses, arranged in layers up to the ceiling. They were no longer shaped like human beings; they were swollen and black. Children, women, girls . . . they didn't look human anymore. The bodies were allowed to accumulate there because the furnaces didn't have the capacity to cremate them. I asked myself, "Where am I? . . ." Even though we knew what was happening there—something like this, what a person looks like after death, I'd never imagined . . . I couldn't believe that such a thing could happen.

Just then I ran into Shlomo Kirshenbaum, a friend of mine who was working there as a Kapo. He was from Makow, and we'd once met and become very close. We were very good friends.

He saw me and asked, "What are you doing here?" I told him, "Listen, Shlomo, I've stumbled into this place and now I know what it is. By tomorrow morning, I won't be here anymore! I won't be alive . . . Tomorrow morning, I'm going to walk to the electric fence . . . to the wires . . . I won't do this work."

Did you want to commit suicide?

Yes, sure.

Kirshenbaum told me, "Listen, the first night is really hard but you get used to it."

Then I said, "How can a person get used to it? Look, I'm not human anymore!" I'd also heard that people in the Sonderkommando didn't live long.

He led me into his room—after all, he was the Kapo—and gave me something strong to drink, some whiskey or alcohol, one drink, then another. "Listen," he said. "When I first got here, I spoke just like you and I got used to it. And I'm still working. I think that you'll also be one of those who gets used to it and who works."

After I drank, I slept all night long. When I woke up, I began to think in a totally different way: I have to do everything I can to stay alive and to tell people what I'm going through.

How do you explain this change of mind?

It's hard to explain. It's human life. Man is strong; the force of life is greater than the pull of suicide. Suicide isn't smart.

More than anything else, I wanted to see the Germans get their comeuppance. From that moment on I made every effort to overcome, to live, and to do my job there. I wanted to live, pure and simple.

The next day, I went to work with Shlomo Kirshenbaum. He told me, "You'll be next to me for the time being. That'll make it easier for you until you get used to it . . ."

In which crematorium did you work?

Number III [IV].[18]

Did you really begin to work in the crematorium with no problems whatsoever?

I myself was the problem. I was confused, I didn't know what to do, how to behave. Personally, I had a very great problem: I was from a family of *kohanim*, and I was still religious back then! I'm a *kohen*, and according to the Jewish religion a *kohen* mustn't go near a grave. He has to stay away from the dead, so as not to become [ritually] impure. And back then I was still a devout Jew!

Shlomo Kirshenbaum told me that the "*dayan* [rabbinical judge] from Makow"[19] was at one of the large crematoria, I [II] or II [III], and that I ought to speak with him.

I went to the *dayan* and asked his advice. There was a *hevra kadisha* [burial society] and the Jews involved in it did this work for God's sake only. But we hadn't come to Auschwitz to make a living and I couldn't have anything to do with such a thing because I'm a *kohen*. So I was torn. The work I had to do was contrary to everything I'd believed in all my life.

So you felt it was important to receive an answer from a rabbinical authority.

Yes. I also asked him lots of other questions about these matters.

Had you known the dayan previously? Was he famous?

Definitely.

What did he tell you?

He said, "Don't worry. We are here to do God's mission. God wants it this way, and we have to take this action because it's a *mitzva* [religious imperative]. It is the Creator's will. It's not within our power to change His will, just as we have no control over His decisions." He also told me in that, in his

opinion, what we were doing was a *mitzva* because in this manner the Jews were given some form of burial. . . .

Were you satisfied with his explanation?

I must have been satisfied at the time. A person tends to trust someone who is greater than him, who is authoritative, who can understand, and who can tell good from evil.

What else did you ask the dayan?

I asked him, "What about the little children who are being murdered here, what are they guilty of? They don't know a thing! . . . They've barely even taken a breath in this world!"

The *dayan* told me, "The children have sinned, too. Little children, even the newborns, are tainted from their mothers' milk. They have inherited their mothers' sins."

Did the rabbi, the dayan, really say that? That little children who had hardly had a chance to breathe were tainted with sin and therefore doomed to die, to be murdered?

Yes. It steered me to the decision I had to make: to live, to be at peace with myself, and to speak with the other survivors and tell them how much suffering a person must endure to be worthy of life.

When you came away from the rabbi, had you decided to accept his approach?

I was still devout back then! I wanted to live; I just wanted to live.

Where did this conversation take place?

In the crematorium.

Did you have an opportunity to speak with the dayan again?

No. We spoke just that once.

Why?

People wanted to mind their own business . . .

I see that you'd like to say something more about this matter?

I thought it was necessary to continue living and working, but I was always the last to do the jobs in the Sonderkommando. The main thing was not to be the first.

What do you mean?

I tried to avoid jobs that could cause me psychological harm.

How could you evade them? Could you choose what to do and what to avoid?

My friend Shlomo could do anything for me. He divided up the work. He decided who would work at the furnaces. He chose strong men. That was the hardest job and I was a simple guy, as they say. He chose me to drag corpses

out of the gas chamber or from the room where the dead were stored, thrown, until they could be cremated.

Did you ask him for easier jobs off your own bat, or did he understand that you . . .

He'd already figured out my mentality and what I was capable of doing . . . You get used to such things quickly; it's hard to believe . . .

So it was your job to remove bodies from the gas chamber. Were you given additional jobs there?

Once I cut hair, once I pulled out gold teeth; I looked for rings on the fingers.

Yankl, can you describe, in as much detail as possible, how the bodies were removed from the chamber? What did they look like?

When they opened the doors, we saw a tangled mass of people who'd been suffocated. Little children at the bottom, adults above them, fat people below. Everyone had wanted to be on top, in order to breathe. It was terrible. The people had become swollen, black, and entangled because of the way they'd suffocated in there. It was hard to untangle them in order to take them to the furnaces.

How did you men manage to separate them?

It wasn't easy. At first it was hard, but afterwards I learned how to work fast.

How long did you have to wait until the doors were opened?

About fifteen minutes. Then they opened the windows and aired the place out. But there was a bad smell and sometimes we wore gas masks as we worked.

How did you remove the bodies?

With a belt. We tied them by the leg and dragged them out by a leg or an arm. A dead person doesn't feel how this is done.

When you took out the bodies, were they warm or cold?

Warm. They were blue, black, and swollen. What I saw in the gas chamber was ghastly, a horrible scene: the people were tangled, it was hard to separate them, they were one mass. We untangled the bodies. The people who were inside, in the chamber—it was horrible. They no longer had faces at all. They'd become a pile; they weren't people anymore. We had to remove these people from the gas chamber and bring them to the room where the bodies were kept. There they divided them into groups: women on one side, men on another side, children on the third side. They hacked off the women's hair, removed the rings from the fingers. "Dentists" took the gold teeth out of their mouths.

Did you sometimes look at the dead people's faces to see if you knew any of them?

There were people whom we knew but "fresh" ones came all the time. There were days when several thousand came and were gassed over a twenty-four-hour period. Usually, however, there were between two thousand and twenty-five hundred people per transport. Sometimes the bodies stayed in the room for a day or two and then they swelled up. The stench was horrible—a smell like fish that had been left in a barrel. They were tangled; they'd suffocated in there. If all the oceans were filled with ink and all the forests and trees were pens—even then it wouldn't be possible to record the atrocity that we saw there every moment, every day.

Did it take lots of physical strength to remove them?

Yes, a dead body is like tin. It's stiff. I had some very hard days. A day's work at the crematorium felt like a year.

What did you do with the bodies?

I took them as far as the furnace. There, other prisoners took them and stuffed them in.

Where did you put the bodies?

Next to the crematorium, on the floor. Before cremation, they had to cut off the hair, remove the eyeglasses, take rings off the fingers, rip out the gold teeth, and pull out the false teeth. We gathered up anything that was valuable.

What did they do with the hair?

We bundled them into sacks. Afterwards, the Germans came by, loaded the sacks into trucks, and took them away.

What was done with the gold teeth that had been torn out?

There were two Jews there, professionals—from Czechoslovakia, I think—and they melted the gold into ingots.

What happened when large transports arrived?

We threw the corpses into pits, outside, next to each other, and we put trees on top of them. In some transports, half of the people were dead by the time they arrived and the rest were *Muselmänner*. *Muselmänner* are people who can't walk, can't work, and can't live, but they can't die, either. It was too expensive to use gas on them, so they threw them into the fire alive.

What happened when you brought the bodies to the furnace?

Two men who worked at the furnace lifted the corpses up to the door and a third man threw them in. Later on, the Germans developed a special method: they decided that you had to cremate a man, a woman, and a child in one go. This made the cremation more effective since the man was skinnier, the woman fatter, and the child very pudgy. They ordered the prisoners to lay a child between the man and the woman. The Germans had a word for the child: *Zulage*.[20] From then on, they always cremated three corpses together: a man, a fat woman, and a child. The heat and the fire from one body set the other two on fire, and the fat kept the fire going.

How many hours did your work day last?

It depended on the size of the transport. When they brought the transports from Hungary, they didn't have time to burn all the Jews in the crematoria. So they went back to using the pits, where they used to do the cremating. They threw trees into the pits together with the bodies so that the fire would burn better. The fat from the bodies dripped into a trench that was on another side.

How do you explain the fact that you were able to continue doing this work, dragging bodies to the furnaces, day in, day out?

The rabbi had said to me, "We've got to tell the generations to come." A person gets used to such a thing, as if nothing exists. And we became robots. A man can even sit down on bodies and eat without any emotion whatsoever, as if there were no bodies around him.

After you'd dragged so many bodies for many days, did you become indifferent to the nature of the objects that you were dragging?

I definitely became indifferent. You lose your ability to feel. The bodies no longer had any value for me. Gradually, I stopped having human emotions about the bodies. I no longer related to them as I would to human bodies. Sometimes they were covered with blood and feces. You can get so used to sights like these that during breaks or whenever people got hungry, they sat down on the bodies and ate.

Did you men sit down to eat next to the corpses?

Yes.

Didn't it bother you? Didn't it spoil your appetite?

You can do it if you're hungry and they've only give you a few minutes' rest. You get so used to such work that you become insensitive. When they let us take a break, when we got tired, we took out some food, sat down on the bodies, and ate as if it were in another world. You get used to anything . . . A person gets used to such work.

Even a reality such as this?

Even this. We sat on the bodies and ate. We drank tea. You can see all these bodies but you drink tea, you eat, anyway.

Did you ever have to drag the bodies of relatives or acquaintances?

Maybe. In the *Bekleidungskammer,* I once found a dress that had belonged to my aunt.

Earlier, you said, "And we became robots." Would you say that about all members of the Sonderkommando?

Not all of them fell into that pattern; we didn't all think alike. There were different kinds of people among us.

Did some lose their moral compass?

Yes. The rabbi-*dayan* was wise enough that he could tell.

You had to "get used to" the cruel daily reality. Were there cases that were especially shocking to you?

There I got to know Moll, an SS man, who was renowned as the most brutal Nazi of all.

I remember once a boy escaped from a transport and hid in the bushes. The rest of the transport had already gone to the undressing room. Moll was a world-class sadist. Before the kid could get a word out of his mouth, Moll shot him. Anyone whom he took out never came back.

Another case was one that I witnessed personally. They brought over a fat man and drained all his blood until he died. Would you believe it? All his blood! They said they needed the blood for German soldiers. They also took flesh from the women, raw flesh.

Was this for "medical experiments"?

No, for surgery.

Do you remember other instances?

One of our men was a guy from my hometown, a neighbor of mine from Zakroczym named Yechezkel Mila. Moll suspected him of something and killed him on the spot. I remember it. He shot him.

Moll always went around with a handgun. He used to play a little game: he was a good sniper and wanted to prove it to everyone. One day he ordered me to hold a cigarette in my mouth. He backed away a little, fired—and cut the cigarette in half. This happened outside, in the yard.

I remember two other stories. The fence around the crematorium yard was always covered with overgrowth and sometimes with blankets. Once a little girl, about five or six years old, went into hiding there. Moll noticed something, pulled out the girl and shot her. Some strong man—out of the 100 or 150 men who were there—should have taken revenge against him right there!

The second story happened at the cremation pits. Once they brought people from the camp. Some of them were still alive; they'd brought the living together with the dead. The Germans had removed them from the "infirmary," Block 7. They threw the people who were still alive into the fire. Moll walked over to the pit with a rifle and shot them after they'd fallen into the fire.

With your permission, I'd like to go return to an earlier phase in the sequence of events. Please tell me about the suffocation in the gas chambers. What did you see? What do you remember?

They put people in the gas chamber until the chamber was full. They stood them next to each other, all squashed together. When they threw in the Zyklon and closed the windows, such pandemonium broke out in there that it took ten minutes for the noise to stop. Afterwards, they opened the doors in order to ventilate the chamber. The Germans ordered us to clean up the chamber,

flush it out, and ventilate it so that the smell would go away before a new transport entered.

Did you ever look into the furnace as the bodies were being cremated?

When they opened the furnace door, we saw the fire and the shapes of the bodies, swaying in the heat. All the limbs of the people in the furnace began to sway from the heat, as if they were coming back to life. The limbs moved around in the furnace. A dead person doesn't feel a thing if they bury him. In the furnace, it was as though he felt something. The fire and the heat change a person's shape. He's not like a chunk of wood. His limbs and tendons heat up and he begins to move.

I want to go even farther back. You saw the Jews as they entered the crematorium building. Was there anything about their behavior that suggested that they felt they were about to die?

Usually, they didn't suspect a thing. Maybe a few people picked up on various signs that something was amiss. Up until the last moment, however, they didn't think that they were about to be killed. The Germans deceived them to the end! One SS man, whose nickname was Moishe Burak,[21] stood in front of the people in the yard before they entered the building, and always told them, "Shower quickly; coffee and cake are already waiting for you on the other side."

The Germans had a way of doing things that made everyone believe what they were told. There was a special sensation there . . . They said, "Now you have to go to the shower, to take a shower, and they've already prepared coffee and cake for you on the other side." Or, "It's a good idea to get a move on—after you undress and take your shower, they'll be waiting for you with coffee and cake." They used deception. The gas chambers had drainage channels like a shower room and the people walked in. Once they were all inside, the SS didn't let them out anymore. No one who went in came out. The people waited for the water to come but the water never came. It was all a deception.

The people went stark naked to the "showers," and when the chamber was totally full, the doors were closed. Then an ambulance with a Red Cross emblem drove up. It carried the Zyklon. The Germans opened the boxes and poured in the Zyklon, Zyklon B, blue in color.

Sometimes we ourselves told them exactly what the SS told them, "In a little while you'll get coffee and cake."

The gas chamber looked like a shower room. There were ducts in the ceiling. The Germans kept pushing more and more people in, until those inside were packed like sardines. Afterwards, they closed the doors. Outside, in the outer wall, was a little opening. The Germans put on their masks, opened the

containers of gas, and threw the gas in through the opening. When we cleaned up the chamber, we saw the remnants of the gas pellets.

Could you see the people after they went into the gas chamber?

Yes. The Germans pushed and crammed them into the chamber—like sardines, as I said. Then they closed the doors.

How many people entered the chamber?

It depended on the size of the transport. Inside the chamber, the people stood there, waiting. The Red Cross car drove up, and Germans got out, opened the windows, and threw the Zyklon in.

What happened the moment the people realized that they'd been tricked?

They began to pound on the doors and to scream. Gradually, it became quiet. As soon as it was totally quiet, they let the Sonderkommando go in to work.

What did you do while the gas was being thrown in?

We waited.

Did you speak with each other?

There was nothing to talk about.

Did you encounter cases of refusal or resistance when the incoming Jews figured out the Germans' ruse?

I remember a case where Jews who'd been living in Warsaw with American papers arrived in a transport. They had been the victims of a Nazi deception, of course. They were well dressed and the whole transport was taken to the crematorium. One of them was a dancer, a beautiful woman. She overcame an SS man and killed him. Somehow, I don't know how, she managed to grab his handgun and shoot him with it. It left a tremendous impression in Auschwitz. Afterwards, they strangled her along with everyone else.[22]

Did anything like that ever happen again?

No.

How can you explain that only a few people took action against the Germans?

A naked person is helpless. He loses all his willpower . . . They've stripped him of his personality.

Did the Sonderkommando men have a regular daily routine?

We got up very early in the morning, while it was still dark, to stand for *Appell*. Some of us said the morning prayers.[23] Then we had something to eat and went to work. We worked in shifts: day shift, night shift. When we returned to the barracks, some of us took things with us, but that was very dangerous. They wanted to barter what they'd taken for cigarettes. We spent the evening in the barracks, describing what we'd endured in the day, what we'd done. Idle conversation. Each of us had his own tales to tell.

I lived in Block 13 until the end. I didn't live in the crematorium building. I walked there.

On Sundays, if we didn't work, people went to the camp to hear the orchestra,[24] which played in the afternoon. There were Russian prisoners who danced. That was going on in one place, while elsewhere, at the very same time, people were working in the crematorium, burning people, corpses . . .

Transports came throughout my time in the Sonderkommando. Afterwards, they laid a railroad track inside Auschwitz and connected Auschwitz with Birkenau so that people would go straight to the crematorium.[25] The transports came directly to the crematoria. That was the peak period before they liquidated the camp. When the Jewish transports came, they were received by the "Kanada" Kommando people. The belongings and things that they'd brought with them were moved to a separate camp, where the "Kanada" people rummaged through the clothes for gold and valuables. Anything good was sent to Germany and the rest was left behind for the camp. The people would be taken to the crematoria that very day. After a day like that, we were all ready to drop. People didn't know what to do with themselves. They had no appetite. There were very hard days. One day in the crematorium was like a year.

Did you think you would survive, that you'd survive Auschwitz?

A human being lives on hope and waits for miracles. I made it, after all. I've raised a model family, I have two children, my son has a master's degree, my daughter has a Ph.D., and I have four grandchildren. Tell me, wasn't it worth it?

Were you ever hungry in the Sonderkommando?

There was no hunger in the Sonderkommando. There was plenty of food. We were allowed to take whatever the people had brought with them.

I'm very intrigued by the question, "What kind of people worked in the Sonderkommando?" How do you view your comrades in the Sonderkommando today, in retrospect?

They weren't normal people. They, the Sonderkommando, weren't normal people. A person who can't cry isn't a human being.

You said, "They weren't normal." Exactly what do you mean?

The way they spoke.

They spoke in a special way? Their tone of voice? Their style?

They spoke a language . . . I couldn't figure out what they were saying. Very crudely. Like speaking today about sex in a vulgar way. It was a different life.

Do you think that this crude manner of speaking was due to the kind of work they had to do?

Yes. As I told you, a person should be . . . If he can't manage to cry, then he's not a human being. He's got no feelings . . .

You said the Sonderkommando men never cried. Including you?

I didn't cry. I haven't cried to this day.

Not even on your first day in the Sonderkommando? Didn't you cry then?

From the very first day I entered another world. I didn't know where on earth I was. I ceased to be a human being. I couldn't tell who I was and what I was doing.

How is it that you were not "infected" by your comrades? How did you stay the same Yankl from Zakroczym? Isn't it possible that something inside you has changed after all?

I didn't stay as I was before Auschwitz. I'm missing lots. I'm not myself. I'm not myself. You know my son and my daughter . . . If you could only know my granddaughter and my grandson . . . He's a genius. . . .

What can you tell me about the killing of the Sonderkommando men?

The Germans wiped out the Sonderkommando prisoners as well. Now and then the Germans came and took a group from the Sonderkommando for a transport, brought them to Auschwitz, and liquidated them there. Usually, people worked in the Sonderkommando for six months or, perhaps, a year or two before they were killed; it depends when they were there. During my service in the Sonderkommando, there was only one liquidation of three hundred men, and they wiped out another three hundred during the uprising. After that, maybe only the last hundred men remained. The Germans then wanted to obliterate all trace of everything that had ever happened in Auschwitz, even the bones. We broke the bones and ground them up very, very fine, and the Germans scattered the ashes in the Vistula River so that no traces would remain.

Let me go back for a moment to your friends' daily lives. Do you remember people in the Sonderkommando trading the various items that they'd found in the undressing hall?

They did business; they bartered with people on the outside.

Whom do you mean?

With Germans and prisoners outside of the Sonderkommando. The Jews brought the belongings and those who went to work outside the camp sold them to Poles who lived in the area.

What was the most sought-after commodity in this barter trade?

Schnapps.

Did you men want to get drunk?

No. How should I put it? We wanted to forget what was on our minds.

Didn't you, too, get drunk once in a while?

I didn't need to. All that time I was living in another world. I wanted to keep a clear head and know what they were saying on the outside. I questioned

friends who had contacts outside: What's going on? What chances have we got? They said they couldn't afford to take so many people with them to the forests. They didn't have enough room.

You must be referring to the members of the resistance movement in the camp. You already noted that you'd been active in the resistance. Can you be more specific?

I joined the resistance even before they transferred us to the Sonderkommando. But in the Sonderkommando, too, I was always in touch with comrades who remained on the outside. This is how we did it: when we went out to bring food from the mess, we received "scripts," bits of paper with information in Yiddish written on them, given to us by that guy Leibl, whom I've already mentioned, with reports on what was happening outside and what was happening inside. Leibl always told me that I'd live, that I'd be free one day, along with everyone, that the time was approaching, that the front was moving closer. Leibl was from Radom; he was a political prisoner and had been in Auschwitz longer than any other Jewish prisoner. His number was 32000. He was one of the first who'd built the camp and he was the *Stubenführer*[26] of Block 5. The *Blockälteste*[27] there was Siwek, a Pole, a good man. Later on, Siwek was appointed *Lagerälteste*. Overall, several Jews had pretty important functions in the camp. All members of the *Schreibstube,*[28] who met the people from the transports, were Jews. They registered them and tattooed their numbers into their forearms. There also Jewish officials from France and Czechoslovakia.

Do you remember the names of members of the resistance?

Our leader was Pilatov, whom I've mentioned. He was one of the Russian prisoners of war. They said he was Jewish. Be that as it may, he always sought contact with the Jews and he was the one who organized the resistance and prepared all the plans. We would meet, of course. When I had questions, I went to him and he said, "We can't take so many people with us." We would gather in Block 5. Sometimes we gathered in the *Bekleidungskammer* barracks.

I was working the night shift at the time. Fifteen to twenty of us would gather, depending on the mission. Sometimes we helped prisoners who were planning to escape with money and clothing. There were people in the camp who'd come from the outside and worked in the camp, Polish civilians who brought us news from the outside.

What was the background of the Sonderkommando uprising?

There were rumors that they wanted to kill off the last of the Sonderkommando, so we had to get ready. We spent a long time preparing for the uprising. It was Kaminski, the Kapo, who planned the operation. We received the bombs from the resistance, homemade grenades manufactured by the resis-

tance and placed on the roof of Crematorium II [III], bombs and a few handguns, too. The explosives were smuggled to us by the girls at the Union plant. The night before the uprising began, Moll noticed that something wasn't right so he took Kaminski out and killed him. Kaminski was the Germans' first victim in the uprising. He was a strong, decent, good man. He was the guardian angel for the Sonderkommando men and for the Germans, too. They used to consult with him.

Kaminski was the strong man of the Sonderkommando, and he had access to all of the high-ranking SS men. We always told each other that if they wiped him out, it would indicate there was no reason for us to wait. The moment they killed Kaminski, we knew they were gearing up to do away with all of us.

The next day, those who were at Crematorium III [IV] burned the building down, there were shots . . . The camp erupted in panic . . . When it was all over, those who were still alive gathered together. A few members seized SS men who were working near crematoria I [II] and II [III] on their way to replace their comrades who were on duty at the *Postenkette,*[29] and killed them. They were burned in the furnace, and that was the signal . . .

When the uprising broke out, I was not far from Crematorium IV [V]. We were pulverizing the remains of the bones.

You could say that the uprising broke out spontaneously because the Germans had come to Crematorium III [IV] to take out our men. In response, our men refused to come out of the crematorium; they stayed inside and set it alight. They torched it. The roofs were made of shingles and there was wood in them. The beds were also made of wood and the mattresses were of straw—all of that caught fire straight away. They didn't blow up the crematorium; they just burned it down. It was a real fire. They also captured several Germans. Inside, in the midst of all the commotion, they were also several bodies of Germans. No one knows who killed them.

When the uprising began, there was pandemonium in the camp. The Germans fired at us. There was a siren and a curfew—a *Blocksperre*—was declared. Everyone who remained in the camp had to go into the barracks.

More than three hundred of us perished that day. I personally witnessed each of them getting a bullet in the back of the head. It's hard for me to say how I survived; to this day I don't know how. Of those who were with me there, Shlomo Kirschenbaum, the Dragon brothers, and a few other friends who now live abroad survived.

After the uprising, we had to incinerate the bodies of our comrades whom the Germans had killed and to pulverize bones that remained. Afterwards, they transferred me to the *Sprengkommando,*[30] and our job there was to obliterate the crematoria.

Firstly, we dismantled the furnaces; the bricks and metalwork were shipped to Germany. Then we made holes in the concrete walls of the crematoria and used dynamite to blow up the crematorium. One of us stood outside the building, tied pulled a cord, and blew them up. I was one of the last ones with the job of blowing up the crematoria.

There were four crematoria. We blew up the two large ones—crematoria I [II] and II [III], which could accommodate more than two thousand people. Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V], which were smaller and only had room for fifteen hundred people, were left. There were still transports with small numbers of people, so they murdered them there.

The *Sprengkommando* came under the Sonderkommando. The Germans wanted to destroy the remains of the bodies and the crematoria quickly, so they used us, and then we had to dismantle the crematoria. It was the last job that we did. I had tremendous satisfaction when we blew up the crematoria! Tremendous satisfaction!

I'd like to speak with you now about matters of religion and faith, things that are dear to you. Before the Holocaust, you were a believer, a religious man. After the Holocaust, you abandoned the faith. Why?

Today I feel that I am a long way from that. Not far from the religion but from faith. It's the result of what I saw there: if this German, Moll, could take a baby from its mother, grab it by the leg, and smash its head against the wall—then faith has lost its value. Seeing something like that, the sight of the baby with its head smashed in, broke me up and destroyed the faith I had.

Your crisis of faith, in Auschwitz, occurred only because of what you saw there?

After everything I saw, I couldn't believe any longer. Children who were torn away from their mothers' breasts—look, they hadn't had time to sin, why did they have to be put to death? If the rabbi could tell me that a baby can be infected by its mother's milk—then my faith had already become shaky and was no longer what it should be.

Are you at peace with the fact that you are not religious? Don't you have regrets?

I can't go back to it. But every Shabbat I attend a Bible group and a class, and I go to synagogue only on the festivals. Today I enjoy hearing the sermons of Rabbi Mordechai Elon.

In Birkenau, did you say the prayers? Did you observe some of the religious commandments?

No.

Didn't you pray silently? Shema Yisrael?

No. I didn't believe in it.

What do you remember about the death march and its aftermath?

On January 15, 1945, they took us from Birkenau to Auschwitz and we spent one day there. There they organized transports to set out. We met a few of our pals there and I told them, "This is the last journey. They won't go all the way with me."

How come the Germans didn't manage to murder all the Sonderkommando members before the camp was evacuated?

They ran out of time. All the prisoners set out with the transport. Everyone got mixed up. You couldn't tell who'd been in the Sonderkommando.

After you left Auschwitz, did Germans try to identify the Sonderkommando prisoners?

At a certain point on the way, the Germans asked, "Who was in the Sonderkommando?" None of us answered.

On January 17, 1945, I escaped from the transport. It was a late winter afternoon. They hadn't fed us on the way and it was very cold. I thought about it and figured: whatever happens, I'm not going to reach the place that we are walking to . . . I had nothing to lose so I ran away. I and three other men. The Germans shot at us and miraculously their bullets missed me. We spent half the night walking through the forest. We were in the area of the Pszczyna forest, in Upper Silesia. We found a hovel there that belonged to the forest watchmen. At night we set out to look for food. We didn't go together; we split up and each of us went in a different direction. In one of the villages we encountered a German who agreed to have us in his home for a few days. The front was still there but SS men were no longer around. Only members of the military police.

I circulated among the soldiers and this German looked suspiciously at me. He asked me, "Who are you?" I was bald then because they'd shaved my head and I told them that I'd fled from the Red Army. He asked me to show him my papers, but I didn't have any. Then he asked, "Why don't you have hair?" Well, I had a bright idea just then. I told him that I'd lost my hair after I'd come down with typhus. That saved my life.

From there I went to Bielsk,[31] where there were no longer any Jews. I wandered around for two days in the forest. The Red Army had arrived by then. One of the military police asked me, "What are you doing?" I answered, "I'm searching for . . . I myself don't know for what." He said, "Come with me." This was just before nightfall. I had nowhere to rest or sleep, so I went with him. He told me that we had come to the headquarters of the Red Army. I sat there for half the night until one of the officers called me over. I told him my whole story from beginning to end. Then I said, "Where can I go? I have nowhere to go to. I have no money, no food, nothing."

He stepped outside, consulted with somebody, and called the soldier again and told him to take me to some family that would be responsible for me, and they'd let me sleep and eat there. I spent a week with that family. I was very weak, I didn't even have a change of clothing. They gave me clothing.

Afterwards Jews began to arrive in Bielsk. In Bielsk, I told myself, "I've got to get a little revenge against the Germans." So I went to the militia and enlisted. I spent about a month or two there. Bielsk was a town where most of the inhabitants were Germans, and at night we went out looking for them. Whatever I could do to them, I did. It happened once, twice, three times, until the commander called me and said, "We're not at war anymore. If you continue to behave the way you've been behaving so far, you'll come to a sticky end." The threat frightened me and I decided to leave the area. I ran away from the militia and went to Cieszyn.[32]

I want to escape from there, too, but where to? To the place that good Jews want to go to—Eretz Israel. But I was unsuccessful. In the meantime, lots of Jews had arrived in Cieszyn. They told me, "Go back to Poland, to Warsaw. There are lots of Jews there and you'll be able to get along better there."

I took their advice and went to Lodz. In Lodz I joined Kibbutz Nitzahon, affiliated with the Ihud movement, even though I wasn't a political party kind of person at all. I waited there are until I could emigrate to Palestine. In Poland, I met my wife, Lowa Soloveitchik. She'd also gone through Auschwitz. We were together on the kibbutz and we got married. I was enlisted—in a mobilization for Palestine, and they did not want to accept her because she'd lost an eye in the war. I went away for training.

One day Lowa came to me and said, "Ya'akov, I'm pregnant. You go and I'll stay here""And who will take care of you?," I asked. So I went to headquarters, the mobilization was headed by an emissary from Palestine whose name I don't remember. He said, "Listen, we need soldiers now. We're not playing war games . . . Your wife will come later." I said to him: "If she can't come together with me, I won't be able to go without her." With that, I returned to the kibbutz. At the kibbutz I did all sorts of jobs while I was waiting for a "certificate" [immigration visa] for Palestine. I got it in 1947.

That year I went to friends together with my wife and there I met childhood friends who were working for the Jewish Agency. One of them told me, "Listen, it's not worth going to Palestine for the moment. Stay here." I said, "What do you mean? I can't not go! I've been waiting all these years for this moment—to go to Palestine." They told me that I'd have it just as good in France as in Palestine: "You'll work here and then you'll go." They talked me into it, and between 1947 and 1951 I worked for the Jewish Agency in France. I was the

camp coordinator. My wife worked as a nurse. When I reached Israel, they sent me to the Nitzanim children's home. I worked there from 1951 to 1959.

At Nitzanim I was the head chef. I'd learned the profession in the camp.

In 1959 we moved to Holon for the children. They were growing up and they needed a school. I've lived in Holon ever since.

With your permission, Ya'akov, let's talk now about how your work in the Sonderkommando affected you in the years after the war. In 1951, after you had arrived in Israel from France, did you tell anyone what you'd gone through?

No, never, to no one. No one heard my story for forty years. I was silent for forty years; I didn't talk with anyone.

But when people looked at your forearm, they saw the number.

Everyone saw it.

What did you say?

I said I'd been in a camp, like lots of Jews.

Didn't you ever use the word "Sonderkommando"?

No, never.

After you started a family, did you tell your wife?

I didn't say a thing. No one in the family knew. After I got married, our children were born and I didn't say a word. No one knew at all. Personally, I was ashamed of myself. I kept it all inside.

What made you have these feelings, of all things—feelings of shame?

I want to explain to you that I was ashamed. Ashamed of myself, of the things a man was capable of. That's why my wife end children didn't know. Who'd believe me? Why did I do it? What excuses can I give? Who'd believe it? To this day, my son says, "If I knew what you'd gone through, I might have behaved differently at home and I might have treated you differently, too."

How did you cope with the memories of the gas chambers after the war?

I was depressed. I ran away from myself. I had only two things in my life: work and sleep—to escape from the memories. I didn't raise my children; they grew up only thanks to my wife. She took care of them. I couldn't. I only wanted two things—to sleep and to run away. I fled from myself. Day and night, it was all the same to me. The nights were long and agonizing. They were torture.

You told me in one of our conversations that you went to work at a bakery on the night shift so you wouldn't have memories and wouldn't have dreams.

I think I did that so as not to think about it. The nights were always too long for me, so I tried to work at night and somehow they passed. But the days were terrible. I was running away from myself. It went on for years. Today there are

nights when it all comes back again. I don't want it to but the whole thing surfaces again. You can't forget. I think that as long as a person lives, until his last moment, he won't forget it.

And did you manage to find the way?

Maybe, but life has been very hard for me. I can't tell you how much I'm really suffering. I see everything that happened back then. There are nights when I go back there in my thoughts, sleepless nights. Then I take pills. It's unbelievable that such a thing happened. Unbelievable. In my dreams I see everything that happened from several directions, from several angles and approaches.

I repeat: "If all the trees in the world became pens and all the oceans turned into rivers of ink, one could not write down and fully document what happened in the Holocaust."

Do you believe today that everything you experienced in Auschwitz really happened?

Absolutely, sure. I saw it all, I saw it with my own eyes. That's why I'm going through this suffering today, all the time, and my nights are difficult.

Do you ever cry when the memories come back?

I can't cry anymore. All emotions of a human being, of crying, have died in me. Yes, as I already told you, I think I'm no longer a person.

Forgive me for asking: would you agree with the premise that your feelings of shame might really be a mask for guilt feelings?

Certainly. Maybe I was the sinner. Why me of all people? Was it not enough that I was in the Auschwitz camp, did I also have to be on the edge of hell, or in hell?

Do you think this way today?

I can say that I thank God that I have been able to go through the seven portals of hell and bring into the world an exemplary family, with successful children and delightful grandchildren. I think the Holy One, God, has forgiven me for my sins.

Notes

Chapter 1. The Sonderkommando in Auschwitz-Birkenau

Epigraph: *Aufbau,* Vol. 29, no. 26, June 1963. I would like to thank my colleague Margalit Shlain for drawing my attention to this poem.

1. Yitzhak Arad, Yisrael Gutman, and Abraham Margaliot (eds.), *Documents on the Holocaust: Selected Sources on the Destruction of the Jews of Germany and Austria, Poland, and the Soviet Union,* Jerusalem 1981, pp. 283–284 (Chaim Rumkowski's speech at the time of the deportation of the children from the Lodz Ghetto, September 4, 1942).

2. See Yitzhak Arad, *Ghetto in Flames: the Struggle and Destruction of the Jews in Vilna in the Holocaust,* Jerusalem, 1976, pp. 279–285.

3. "Euthanasia" was the National Socialist plan to kill systematically the group of people termed *lebensunwertes Leben* (possessors of a life unworthy of being lived). It specifically targeted the physically and mentally handicapped, but over time ever broader groups of people were murdered within the frame of the "euthanasia" program. The overall number of people "euthanized" is estimated at approximately 275,000.

4. Sonnenstein, near Dresden, was one of the "euthanasia" killing centers where operations continued even after the program officially ended in September 1941. A large number of concentration-camp prisoners, mostly selected at random, were murdered at Sonnenstein.

5. Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle 1939–1945: From the Archives of the Auschwitz Memorial and the German Federal Archives.* New York, 1992, p. 75.

6. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 86.

7. See Franciszek Piper, "Gas Chambers and Crematoria," in I. Gutman and M. Berenbaum, *Anatomy of the Auschwitz Death Camp,* Bloomington, 1994, p. 161.

8. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 178.

9. One member of this group was Karol Swiebocki, the father of Henryk Swiebocki, a historian at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oswiecim. See the Auschwitz Museum Archives, *Sterbebuch,* t. 13 k. 1123; *Stärkebuch,* t. 2 k. 291, Death certificate 19141/194; Proces Hössa, t. 7 k. 155; Akta szpitala obozowego AuI, bl. 28, k. 347.

10. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 230.

11. The first cremations of bodies at the crematorium in the main camp took place on August 15, 1940. See Jean Claude Pressac, *Les crématoires d'Auschwitz: La machinerie du meurtre de masse* Paris, 1993, p. 13.

12. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 28. See also *Wsrod koszmarnej zbrodni: Rekopisy czionkow Sonderkommando* (In the very midst of a ghastly crime: Manuscripts of members of the Sonderkommando) (hereafter *Manuscripts of the Sonderkommando*), *Zeszyty Oswiecimskie* (*Hefte von Auschwitz*), Numer Specjalny (II), Oswiecim, 1971, pp. 40–42, 48. For full details of publications of the "secret writings" of members of the Sonderkommando, see below, note 108.

13. Jozef Ilczuk (prisoner no. 14916) worked at the crematorium of the main camp as a *Blockschreiber* (record-keeper); Mieczyslaw Morawa (prisoner no. 5730) was the Kapo (prisoner-leader) of the Kommando.

14. Filip Müller, *Sonderbehandlung—Drei Jahre in den Krematorien von Auschwitz*, Munich, 1979, p. 64.

15. Ibid., pp. 66–67.

16. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 170.

17. Müller, *Sonderbehandlung,* p. 24.

18. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 135. However, reports by former prisoners and testimonies of SS men indicate that small groups of Jews, who were taken to cremation in the main camp, had been observed already in the autumn of 1941. See W. Dlugoborski and F. Piper, eds., *Auschwitz 1940–1945. Key Problems in the History of the Camp,* Oswiecim, 1995, Vol. III, p. 131.

19. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 167.

20. Interview with Andre Balbin (Andreas Kilian, Frankfurt am Main, January 14, 1999; Andreas Kilian private archive).

21. Müller, *Sonderbehandlung,* pp. 31–32.

22. Steven Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz, by Rudolph Höss* (hereafter *Autobiography of Rudolph Höss*), New York, 1996. Höss writes in this memoir (p. 29) that in the autumn of 1941 he, together with Eichmann, chose two rustic cottages that were suitable for the installation of interior gas chambers. Eichmann, at his trial, denied having met with Höss in Auschwitz.

23. Piper, "Gas Chambers and Crematoria," p. 161.

24. Interviews with Arnost (Ernst) Rosin (Andreas Kilian, Düsseldorf, May 13, 1995; November 4, 1995; May 10, 1997; Andreas Kilian private archive).

25. See interviews with Arnost Rosin; see also Pressac, *Les crématoires d'Auschwitz*, p. 117; and Maurice Schellekes' report, Haifa, December 1981, and the correspondence

between Morris Schellekes and Erich Kulka on January 29, 1982 (Yad Vashem Archives [hereafter YVA] P25).

26. Interview by Erich Kulka with Arnost (Ernst) Rosin, May 13, 1975 (YVA 033/1329).

27. Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 198–199.

28. In regard to Blobel, see Israel Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust,* Vol. A, New York, 1990, pp. 219–220. See also testimony of Paul Blobel on the cremation of bodies and the obfuscation of traces in Arad et al., *Documents on the Holocaust,* pp. 471–473.

29. Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 238–239.

30. Ibid., p. 242.

31. *Autobiography of Rudolf Höss,* p. 32. No sources that corroborate Höss' count of corpses are available.

32. The term "Sonderkommando"—"special labor detail"—is of unknown origin. The Nazis often attached the prefix *Sonder* (special) to other words to create euphemisms, e.g., *Sonderbehandlung* (special treatment) and *Sonderaktion* (special action or operation).

33. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 277.

34. *Autobiography of Rudolf Höss,* pp. 35–36. Note that in the original text of the English edition the numbering of the crematoria is given as "two large crematoria II–III and the two smaller crematoria IV–V." For the different numbering of the crematoria, see also note 35.

35. The crematoria were given two sets of numbers: I–V (including the crematorium in the main camp) and I–IV (only the crematoria in Birkenau). The I–V numbering is more prevalent in some German documents, prisoners' reports, and literature on the topic. In the interviews, the Sonderkommando prisoners used the I–IV numeration. In order to avoid confusion, both sets are preserved; when the I–IV numbering is given, the I–V numbering, which includes the crematorium in the main camp, is added in brackets.

36. Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 344–345.

37. Ibid., p. 442.

38. In the Birkenau camp, the Sonderkommando prisoners were housed in the following locations: first in Sector BIb, Blocks 22–23, later in Block 2; subsequently they were moved to Sector BIId, Block 13 and Blocks 9 and 11. Eventually they stayed in the lofts of Crematoria II [III] and IV [V].

39. For further information on the "Kanada" Kommando, see note 45.

40. Zalman Gradowski, "In harz fun geheynom: A dokument fun Oyshvitser Zonderkommando, 1944" (In the heart of hell: A document of the Sonderkommando at Auschwitz, 1944) (hereafter *In the Heart of Hell*), unpublished manuscript, tr. from Yiddish into Hebrew by Itiel Rubinstein, Bnei Brak, 1998, p. 55 (copyright of this translation by Gideon Greif). For full details of publications of the "secret writings" of members of the Sonderkommando, see below, note 108.

41. Zalman Lewental, "Pamietnik czlonka Sonderkommando Auschwitz II" (Diary of a member of the Auschwitz II Sonderkommando) (hereafter Lewental, "Diary"), tr. from Yiddish into Polish by Adam Weza and Adam Rutkowski, *Biuletijn ZIH* 65–66 (January–June 1968), pp. 220–221; and Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* Tel Aviv, 1985,

pp. 211–212. For full details of publications of the "secret writings" of members of the Sonderkommando, see below, note 108.

42. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 208.

43. Elevators were used only in Crematoria I [II] and II [III], where the gas chamber and the undressing room were in the cellar. Crematoria [III] IV and IV [V] had no underground area, making an elevator unnecessary there.

44. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 77.

45. "Kanada"—a sector of the camp where, in large storage facilities, the objects stolen from prisoners in Auschwitz and its satellite camps were gathered. The official name of this camp was the *Effektenlager*. There were two such sectors. The first was established near the Deutsche Ausrüstungswerke plant at the Auschwitz main camp and was called *Effektenlager I*. Composed of five wooden barracks and one of stone, it held looted articles that were collected into large packages for shipment to Germany. After *Effektenlager II* was established in Sector BIIg of Birkenau, "Kanada" I was used only when "Kanada" II was filled beyond capacity. "Kanada" II was composed of thirty wooden structures, most designated for storage and sorting; two barracks for the men and women prisoners who worked there; and one barracks that the SS used as living quarters and for their official duties. One thousand to sixteen hundred male and female prisoners were employed at "Kanada" I up to the end of 1943. In "Kanada" II, fifteen hundred to two thousand prisoners worked from 1944 on.

The term "Kanada" was coined, so far as we can ascertain today, by Polish-Jewish prisoners who worked in the two *Effektenlager*. Members of "Kanada" Kommando I opened the suitcases and rucksacks of new arrivals, sorted the items inside them, searched for hidden valuables, removed indications of Jewish ownership, and separated damaged goods from usable quality items. Because of the enormous, unimaginable wealth that accumulated in the microcosm of the Effektenlager, the sorters had the impression that they were handling the riches of a country like Canada, which Poles considered the epitome of wealth. It was a desperate, or cynical, attempt to give a name to the isolated, contained world of the objects. Another proposed explanation for the name "Kanada" is that German-speaking members of the "Kanada" Kommando were often heard asking, as they were sorting the objects, "Kann er da nicht was drin' haben? (Might there be something [valuable] inside?"

Work in the "Kanada" Kommando was considered one of the best jobs in Auschwitz and was highly sought after, because prisoners in the detail could very easily "organize" objects that they handled during sorting for themselves, their families, and their friends, and barter them for food or other essentials. Furthermore, "Kanada" prisoners worked indoors at tasks that were not particularly arduous. This explains the relatively large number of survivors among the "Kanada" prisoners.

46. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 218. In quotations such as this, which are taken from 'secret writings" published in English (below, note 108), dots that are not enclosed in square brackets are as given in the source and usually denote text that is missing due to the deteriorated condition of the documents. Dots within square brackets denote ellipses introduced by the author of this book. Words within square brackets denote explanatory insertions by the author, and angle brackets denote his surmises as to missing words in deteriorated documents. In the interviews, dots indicate pauses in speech.

47. Ibid., p. 220.
48. Interview with Yehoshua Rosenblum (Gideon Greif, Haifa, September 17, 1990).
49. Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust,* New York, 1985, p. 165.
50. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 79.
51. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 219–220.
52. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 57.
53. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 212–214.
54. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* pp. 47, 89.
55. Ibid., pp. 60–61.
56. Ibid., pp. 52–53, 54.
57. Ibid., p. 57.
58. Ibid., p. 56.
59. The controversy about the reputation and morality of the Sonderkommando is discussed in "The Moral Problematics of the Sonderkommando," later in this chapter.
60. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* pp. 58–59.
61. Ibid., p. 79.
62. Ibid., pp. 84, 96.
63. Ibid., pp. 108–109, 110–111.
64. These writings are discussed in "The Sonderkommando Prisoners and the Secret Writings," later in this chapter.
65. Ibid., p. 45. See also Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 513; and Filip Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Chicago, 1999, pp. 86–89 (This English edition is an abridged version of Müller, *Sonderbehandlung*).
66. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* pp. 87, 88.
67. The uprising in Treblinka occurred on August 2, 1943. See Yitzhak Arad, *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhardt Death Camps* Bloomington, 1987, pp. 81–89, 270–299, 360–365.
68. The uprising in Sobibor began on October 14, 1943. Ibid., pp. 306–334, 360–365.
69. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 177; Henryk Swiebocki, *Auschwitz 1940–1945*, Vol. IV, *The Resistance Movement,* Oswiecim, 2000, pp. 243–244.
70. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 264; Swiebocki, *Auschwitz 1940–1945,* pp. 123, 233.
71. In regard to the camp resistance movement, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* ch. 3: "The General Insurrectionist Underground at Auschwitz," pp. 27–38.
72. Israel Gutman, "The Jewish Resistance Movement at Auschwitz," in *Bulletins of the Ghetto Fighters' House*, No. 14/15, April 1956, pp. 43–48 (Hebrew); Mordechai Halelli (a.k.a. Motek Bielowicz), *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits* [The Zionist underground in Auschwitz], private publication, p. 13; testimony of Noach Zabludowicz (Hebrew), YVA 03/1187, pp. 17–18; interview with Noach Zabludowicz (Gideon Greif, April 18, 1997, and August 12, 1998).
73. Gutman, "The Jewish Resistance Movement at Auschwitz," pp. 46–47; Israel Gutman, *Anashim va-effer — Sefer Auschwitz-Birkenau* [People and ash — the Auschwitz-Birkenau book] (hereafter *People and Ash*), Merhavia, 1957, pp. 144–147.
74. *People and Ash,* pp. 118–172.
75. Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, pp. 17, 19–20; Moshe Kulka, YVA, 03/1186, pp. 17–18.

76. Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, p. 15; *People and Ash,* p. 147.

77. For information on Roza Robota, see *People and Ash,* pp. 151–157; Raya Kagan, *Women in the Chamber of Hell,* Merhavia, 1947, pp. 227–229 (Hebrew); "Robota, Roza," in *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust,* pp. 1286–1287; *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* ch. 14, pp. 147–154; Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, pp. 21–22; Ingrid Strobl, *Sag nie, du gehst den letzten Weg,* Frankfurt am Main, 1995, pp. 297–300; Haya Kroyn, *Take Me With You*, Tel Aviv, 1995, pp. 66–68, 74–75 (Hebrew); Yuri Suhl, *They Fought Back: The Story of the Jewish Resistance in Nazi Europe,* New York, 1975, pp. 189–195.

78. Moshe Kulka, YVA 03/1186; A. Wolf-Jasny (ed.), *Yizkor-buch Ciechanow* (hereafter *Ciechanow Memorial Book*), (Yiddish/Hebrew) Tel Aviv, 1962, pp. 385–386; Noach Zabludowicz testimony, pp. 18–19.

79. See testimony of David Nencel, YVA 03/6014, pp. 71–72.

80. See Jehuda Laufer's testimony in Lore Shelley, *The Union Kommando in Auschwitz —The Ammunition Factory in the Eyes of Former Slave Laborers,* Lanham, 1996, p. 181.

81. *Ciechanow Memorial Book,* pp. 22–23.

82. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 224–230.

83. Ibid., pp. 134–135. Members of the camp resistance movement attempted to persuade the Sonderkommando prisoners that, for a series of reasons, an uprising was not possible at that time, but all their arguments were rejected. The Sonderkommando members, aware that thousands of Jews were being gassed and cremated daily, were too passionate and determined to accept any compromise.

84. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 228–229; Leon Cohen, "From Greece to Birkenau—the Uprising of the Crematorium Workers," in, *Pe'amim (Journal for Research on Jewish Communities in the East),* No. 27, pp. 125–133 (Hebrew); Müller, *Sonderbehandlung,* pp. 146–147; Erich Kulka, "Jewish Revolt in Auschwitz," in *The Voice of Auschwitz Survivors in Israel,* September 28, 1984, p. 3.

85. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 228 ("We ground the teeth and kept silence").

86. Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eyewitness Account,* New York, 1993, p. 130.

87. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 228–229.

88. Ibid., pp. 229–230.

89. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 147; Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Death Factory: Document on Auschwitz*, Oxford, 1966 (English edition of *Tovarna na smrt,* Prague, 1946), pp. 151–152.

90. Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 715–716.

91. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 229; Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 152; testimony of Filip Müller, in Hermann Langbein, *Der Auschwitz-Prozess—Eine Dokumentation,* 2 vols., Vienna, 1965, Vol. 1, p. 132.

92. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 229–230; Noach Zabludowicz testimony, p. 19; Kraus and Kulka, *The Death Factory,* p. 258; Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, pp. 154–155.

93. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 156; Kulka, "Jewish Revolt in Auschwitz," pp. 4–5; Erich Kulka, "40 Jahren—Der Aufstand der Juden in Auschwitz" in *3. Deutsch-*

polnisches Jahrbuch der deutsch-polnischen Gesellschaft Bremen, Bremen, 1985, p. 197; Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 725–726.

94. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 726.

95. The question of whether the Sonderkommando prisoners blew up or torched the building of Crematorium III [IV] has been given several answers. See Kraus and Kulka, *The Death Factory,* p. 256–260; Shelley, *Union Kommando in Auschwitz,* pp. 303–305; *Ciechanow Memorial Book,* p. 25; Mordechaj Papierblatt, *Mavriah ha-karpionim—900 yom be-mahanot Oshvits* [The carp smuggler—900 days in the Auschwitz camps], Tel Aviv, pp. 344–355; Kagan, *Women in the Chamber of Hell*, p. 218; Olga Lengyel, *Five Chimneys,* Chicago, 1947, pp. 162–163; Hadassah Priwes, *In roych fun Brzezinki* [The smoke of Brzezinka] (hereafter *The Smoke of Brzezinka*), Tel Aviv, 1966, p. 194; Reuben Ainstein, *Jewish Resistance in Nazi-Occupied Eastern Europe,* London, 1974, p. 812; interview with Godel Silber (Gideon Greif and Andreas Kilian, Toronto, January 10, 1998).

96. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 159; Kulka, "Vor 40 Jahren," p. 199; Gutman, "The Jewish Resistance Movement at Auschwitz," p. 47; Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 725–726.

97. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 159; Kulka, "Vor 40 Jahren," p. 199; Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, p. 21.

98. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz*, p. 159; Czech, *Chronicle,* pp. 725–726; *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 143.

99. Testimony of the witness Milton Buki, in Langbein, *Der Auschwitz-Prozess—Eine Dokumentation,* Vol. I, p. 130; *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 143.

100. Czech, *Chronicle,* p. 726.

101. Kagan, *Women in the Chamber of Hell*, pp. 227–229; Kroyn, *Take Me with You,* p. 73; *Ciechanow Memorial Book,* p. 25; *People and Ash,* pp. 154–157; Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, pp. 21–22; interview with Gisa Weissblum (Gideon Greif, Ramat Gan, July 6, 2001, and Givatayim, July 20, 2001).

102. *People and Ash,* pp. 155–156; Halelli, *Ha-mahteret ha-tsiyyonit be-Oshvits*, pp. 21–22.

103. Ibid., pp. 156–157.

104. Kroyn, *Take Me With You,* p. 75; *Ciechanow Memorial Book,* p. 391.

105. Gutman, "The Jewish Resistance Movement at Auschwitz," p. 47; *People and Ash,* pp. 153–154.

106. *The Smoke of Brzezinka,* p. 194.

107. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 232.

108. The writings of Sonderkommando members have appeared in various publications over the years. First, some of the writings, such as Lewental, "Diary," were published in the bulletin of the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw (above, note 41). Later, an incomplete Polish version appeared in *Zeszyty Oswiecimskie*, a publication of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum (above, note 12). Thereafter, this version appeared in English translation as *Amidst a Nightmare of Crime*, Oswiecim, 1973; and then in Polish and German (*Inmitten des grauenvollen Verbrechens*, Oswiecim, 1996. Meanwhile, Ber Mark had published excerpts in Hebrew *Gal-ed,* a journal published by Tel Aviv University (no. 1, 1973, pp. 309–335), and his complete Yiddish edition was published in Israel

in 1977 under the title *Megilas Oyshvits* (Scrolls of Auschwitz). Mark's edition was republished in Hebrew (Tel Aviv, 1978), and in English (above, note 41).

109. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 32.

110. Ibid., p. 82.

111. *Manuscripts of the Sonderkommando,* p. 74.

112. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 174.

113. Ibid., p. 238.

114. Ibid., p. 239.

115. Ibid., p. 240.

116. Ibid., pp. 239, 240.

117. Ibid., pp. 210–211.

118. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* New York, 1988, p. 53.

119. Lewental, "Diary," pp. 221–222.

120. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 222.

121. Lewental, 'Diary," p. 222.

122. See also interview with Yaakov Freimark (Gideon Greif, Givatayim, June 8, 2001); and the case of "Ace" Grünbaum, son of the famous Polish Zionist politician Itzhak Grünbaum, who was a "barracks elder" in Birkenau, *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 50–51.

123. *Mishpat Eichmann: Eduyot* [Eichmann trial: Testimonies], Vol. II, Jerusalem, 1963, pp. 1122–1123.

124. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* p. 59.

125. Alfred Fiderkiewicz, *Brzezinka: Wspomnienia z obozu* [Birkenau: Memories from the camp], Warsaw, 1965, pp. 132–187.

126. Franciszek Stryj, *W cieniu Krematorium: Wspomnienia z dziesieciu hitlerowskich wiezien i obozow koncentracyjnych* [In the shadow of the Crematorium: Memories of ten prisons and concentration camps], Katowice, 1965, pp. 245–249.

127. Janina Komenda, *Lager Brzezinka* [The Birkenau camp], Warsaw, 1986, p. 100.

128. Seweryna Szmaglewska, *Smoke over Birkenau*; Oswiecim, 2001 (Polish edition: *Dymy nad Birkenau*; Warsaw, 1968), pp. 281–282.

129. Jacob Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, New York, 1965, p. 336. Robinson refers in his book to Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, New York, Viking Press, 1963.

130. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, p. 200; referring to Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 86–86.

131. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, p. 200; referring to Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, pp. 171, 109 (emphasis added).

132. See H. E. Holthusen, Hannah Arendt, "Eichmann und die Kritiker" [Eichmann and the critics], in *Vierteljahreshefte für Zeitgeschichte,* Vol. 13, 1965, pp. 178–190; F. Krummacher (ed.), *Die Kontroverse* [The controversy], Munich, 1964; S. Lietzmann, "Waren die Opfer Komplizen der Henker?" *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,* November 16, 1963.

133. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, p. 201; referring to Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, p. 171. Robinson cites a further mistaken assumption of Arendt's. She implies that the Sonderkommando prisoners generally comprised undesirable elements of Jewish society. In fact, she writes this about all Jews whom the SS kept alive (ibid.,

p. 109). Again Robinson refutes Arendt's claim by referring to a well-documented fact about the selection process. "It is well known that the only criterion for selection was physical fitness. In fact, since the selection was always made immediately at first sight, without the aid of papers or records, it would have been impossible for the SS men in charge of selection to use anything but physical criteria" (ibid., p. 335 n. 159). This argument applies equally to the Sonderkommando prisoners, since most of them were selected for work in the crematoria immediately upon arrival in the camp.

134. Robinson, *And the Crooked Shall Be Made Straight*, p. 201.

135. *Autobiography of Rudolph Höss,* pp. 158, 160.

136. This aspect not only pertains to the Sonderkommando but also describes a wider strategy of the Nazis, who forced the Jews to participate in and even finance their own extermination. The intention behind this strategy was to blur the boundary between victim and perpetrator.

137. The testimonies of the Sonderkommando prisoners also reflect often an intense projection of empathy and pity toward the victims' corpses. The following quotation illustrates clearly the vibrancy of human emotions that still existed beneath the surface of numbed feelings and adaptive behavior: "The whole process lasts twenty minutes and a human body, a whole world, falls to ashes. Paralyzed, you stand there and watch. You place two of them on top. Two people, two worlds, who had their place among people, lived, acted and created. They created for the world and for themselves. They have laid layers of a big buildings, they have laid the tracks for the world and the future—and soon—within twenty minutes, nothing will remain of them." Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 79.

138. *Autobiography of Rudolph Höss,* pp. 160–161.

139. Krystyna Zywulska, *Przezlyam Oswiecim* [I survived Auschwitz], Warsaw, 1996, p. 187.

140. *Autobiography of Rudolph Höss,* p. 161.

141. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 221.

142. Wolfgang Sofsky, *The Order of Terror,* Princeton, 1999, p. 271.

143. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 221–222.

144. Ibid., p. 127.

145. Ibid., p. 126.

146. For further background reading, see Henryk Swiebocki (ed.), *London Has Been Informed . . . Reports by Auschwitz Escapees,* Oswiecim, 1997.

147. Maria Rychlik, *Smierc daje zycie* [Death gives life], Krakow, 1967, p. 110.

148. *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* p. 126.

149. *The Drowned and the Saved*, p. 53.

150. Ibid., pp. 53, 55.

151. Ibid., p. 59.

152. Quoted in *The Drowned and the Saved,* p. 60 (Vercors [Jean Bruller], *Les armes de la nuit,* Paris, 1953).

153. Ibid., p. 58.

154. See Wolfgang Sofsky, "An der Grenze des Sozialen: Perspektive der KZ-Forschung," in Ulrich Herbert, Karin Orth, and Christoph Dieckmann (eds.), *Die nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslager, Entwicklung und Struktur,* Vol. II, Göttingen, 1998, p. 1157.

155. Ibid., p. 1157.

156. Zywulska in *People and Ash,* pp. 103–104.

157. Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* p. 60.

158. The term "Un caso-limite di collaborazione" in the Italian edition of Primo Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Turin, 1994, p. 36) has been mistranslated in the English edition as "an extreme case of collaboration," and the negative connotation of this expression totally fails to capture the message of Levi's subsequent analysis of the Sonderkommando (cf. *The Drowned and the Saved,* p. 50).

159. In this matter, see Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million: The Israelis and the Holocaust,* New York, 1993; Yehuda Bauer, *The Holocaust and the Struggle of the Yishuv as Factors in the Establishment of the State of Israel,* Jerusalem, 1976; Ilana Shamir, *Perpetuation and Memory—The Way of Israeli Society in Creating Memorial Landscapes,* Tel Aviv, 1996 (Hebrew); Ne'ima Barzel, *Ad klot u-mi-neged* [To the finish and aside], Jerusalem, 1998.

160. See Dina Vardi, *Nos'ey ha-chotam—Dialog im bney ha-dor ha-sheny la-Shoah* [Bearers of the imprint, a dialogue with second-generation Holocaust survivors], Jerusalem, 1990.

161. Andrzej Strzelecki, *Endphase des KL Auschwitz*, Oswiecim, 1995, p. 268.

162. Testimony of Stanislaw Jankowski (Alter Feinsilber) in *Manuscripts of the Sonderkommando,* pp. 30–66.

163. Strzelecki, *Endphase des KL Auschwitz,* pp. 268–269.

164. Transcript of Shlomo Dragon's testimony on May 10, 11, and 17, 1945, in Franciszek Piper, *Die Zahl der Opfer von Auschwitz*, Oswiecim, 1993, pp. 203–225; see also Archive of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes against the Polish People—National Memorial Institute, Warsaw (Glowna Komisja BZpNP IPN Warszawa) NTN 93 (the Höss trial), pp. 102–118. The transcript of Henryk Tauber's testimony, given on May 24, 1945, appears ibid., pp. 122–150.

165. Testimony of Charles Sigismund Bendel at the trial of Josef Kramer, in *Trial of Josef Kramer and 44 others (The Belsen Trial),* London, 1946, p. 130.

166. Höss's trial took place on March 11–29, 1947, and ended with the reading of the verdict on April 2; see Archive of the Main Commission for the Investigation of Crimes Against the Polish People, NTN (Proces Hossa).

167. Trial of Walter Dejaco and Fritz Ertl before the Vienna Assize Court, January–March 1972, in *Oswiecim—hitlerowski oboz masowej zagtady* (Auschwitz—Hitlerite mass extermination camp), Warsaw, 1981, p. 195.

168. Kraus and Kulka, *Tovarna na smrt.*

169. "Family camp"—see Chapter 3, note 59.

170. All interviews in Erich Kulka Collection, YVA P25: interviews with Yehoshua Rosenblum on April 17–18, 1982, October 7, 1983, and April 3, 1986; interview with Ya'akov Gabai on July 20, 1983; interview with Elimelech (Milton) Buki on October 23, 1984; interview with Shlomo Dragon on May 3, 1982; interview with Daniel Bennahmias on March 4, 1985.

171. Hermann Langbein, *Menschen in Auschwitz,* Frankfurt am Main–Berlin, 1980; translated as *People in Auschwitz* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2004).

172. In the mid-1980s, in several articles in the journal *The Voice of Auschwitz Sur-*

vivors in Israel (Vol. 14, Feb. 1981, pp. 4–5; Vol. 18, March 1981, pp. 5–6; Vol. 21, December 1982, pp. 7–8; Vol. 25, December 1983, pp. 2–3. Kulka and several survivors of the Sonderkommando accused Langbein of besmirching the image of the prisoners in this detail. Kulka and the Sonderkommando survivors launched a public campaign against Langbein that induced him, shortly before his death, to omit the problematic text about the Sonderkommando from his book *Menschen in Auschwitz*.

173. Ber Mark, *Powstanie w getcie warszawskim* [The Warsaw ghetto uprising], Warsaw, 1954.

174. For full details of publications of the "secret writings" of members of the Sonderkommando, see above, note 108.

175. See above, note 73. Israel Gutman wrote about Gradowski, his comrades, the Sonderkommando, and the Sonderkommando uprising in another book, *Ba'alata u-vama'avak* [Struggles in darkness—studies in holocaust and resistance)] Tel Aviv, 1985, pp. 270–275.

176. David A. Recanati (ed.), *Zikhron Saloniki* [Remembering Salonika], Tel Aviv, 1972.

177. Cohen, "From Greece to Birkenau," pp. 110–142.

178. Josef Sackar, "In the Very Midst of Hell—Testimony of a Former Sonderkommando Prisoner in Birkenau, Interview with Gideon Greif" (Hebrew), *Edut,* Vol. 7, January 1992, pp. 99–113.

179. Michael Molcho and Joseph Nechama, *Shoat Yehudey Yavan 1941–1944),* [The Holocaust of Greek Jewry 1941–1944], Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 191–194, 196.

180. Yosef Ben, *Yehudey Yavan ba-Shoah u-vahitnagdut 1941–1944* [Greek Jewry, the Holocaust, and the resistance movement 1941–1944], Tel Aviv, 1985. The chapter on the Sonderkommando uprising is recommended.

181. Danuta Czech, *Hashmadat Yehudey Yavan be-Oshvits* [The annihilation of the Jews of Greece in Auschwitz], in *Dapim le-heqer ha-Shoah ve-ha-mered* [Papers for research on the Holocaust and the uprising], Tel Aviv, 1973, pp. 181–194.

182. Bracha Rivlin (ed.), *Pinkas Hakehillot: Yavan* [Encyclopedia of the Jewish communities: Greece], Jerusalem, 1999.

183. *Ciechanow Memorial Book,* pp. 332–407.

184. David Stockfisch, *Mlava ha-yehudit—koroteyha, hitpatchuta, kilyona* [Jewish Mlawa—its history, its development, and its destruction], Vol. 2, Tel Aviv, 1984, Ch. 2, "Extermination and Warfare."

185. Testimony of Shlomo Dragon, in Elimelech Skliar, Abraham Dragon, and Shlomo Dragon (eds.), *Zuromin in Poland—History of a Destroyed Community,* private edition, 1992, pp. 25–32.

186. Abraham Wein (ed.), *Pinkas Hakehillot: Polin* [Encyclopedia of the Jewish communities: Poland], Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, 1976–. Thus far, Vol. 1 in this series (Lodz and vicinity), Vol. 2 (Eastern Galicia), Vol. 3 (Western Galicia and Silesia), Vol. 4 (Warsaw and vicinity), Vol. 5 (Wolyn and Polesie), Vol. 6 (Poznan and Pomorze), and Vol. 7 (Lublin and Kielce) have been published.

187. Lanzmann, *Shoah,* interview with Filip Müller, pp. 57–60, 68–70, 123–127, 145–146, 149–150, 158–159, 163–165.

188. Marsel Nadzari, *Khroniko 1941–1945* [Chronicle 1941–1945], Salonika, 1991.

189. *People and Ash,* pp. 156–157.

190. Leon Cohen, *From Greece to Birkenau—The Crematoria Workers' Uprising,* Saloniki Research Center, Tel Aviv, 1996.

191. Müller, *Eyewitness Auschwitz.*

192. Ibid., pp. 12, 14, 17.

193. The English edition was edited and translated by Susanne Flatauer in literary collaboration with Helmut Freitag.

194. Lanzmann, *Shoah.*

195. Miklos Nyiszli, *Boncoloorvosa az Auschwitz i krematoriumban* [The pathologist-doctor at the crematorium in Auschwitz], Debrecen, 1947.

196. Miklos Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eye-Witness Account,* London, 1964. The book has also been published in Romanian (Bucharest, 1964–1965), Polish (Warsaw, 1966), Hebrew (Bnei Brak, 1985), and German (Berlin, 1992).

197. Miklos Nyszli, *Auschwitz: A Doctor's Eye-Witness Account,* New York, 1993, pp. 77–78.

198. Max Perkal, *Schön war es draussen—Aufzeichnungen eines 19-jährigen aus dem Jahre 1945 / Outside Was Beautiful—The Notebook of a 19-Year-Old Written in 1945,* Zurich-London, 1995, pp. 24–33, 35–36, 39.

199. Donald Watt died in Sydney in early 2000.

200. Donald Watt, *Stoker: The Story of an Australian Soldier Who Survived Auschwitz-Birkenau,* Sydney-New York-London, 1995.

201. The documentation from the Frankfurt trials contains excerpts of the testimonies of Milton Buki, Filip Müller, and Dov Paisikovic. Other recommended books by Langbein are *Nicht wie Schafe zur Schlachtbank—Widerstand in den nationalsozialistischen Konzentrationslagern 1938–1945*, Frankfurt am Main, 1980; and *People in Auschwitz* (see above, note 170).

202. H. G. Adler, Hermann Langbein, and Ella Lingens-Reiner, *Auschwitz—Zeugnisse und Berichte*, Hamburg, 1995.

203. Lore Shelley's publications include *Auschwitz—The Nazi Civilization,* Lanham, 1992; *Criminal Experiments on Human Beings in Auschwitz and War Research Laboratories,* San Francisco, 1991; *Secretaries of Death,* New York, 1986.

204. Gradowski, *In the Heart of Hell,* p. 23.

205. Ibid., p. 80.

206. Ibid., pp. 46, 48.

Chapter 2. Josef Sackar

1. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

2. Arta—city in the south of the province of Epiros, eighteen kilometers from the Gulf of Arta and seventy-five kilometers from Ioannina. The town has had a Jewish community since the fourteenth century. It was famous for its rabbis and Talmudic scholars, including famous arbiters of religious law who lived there in the sixteenth century. Some 350 Jews from Arta were sent to the extermination camps.

3. The arrests of Jews in Athens began a day earlier, on March 23, 1944. The Gestapo tricked the Jews by spreading a rumor that matzo and sugar for the coming Passover festival would be distributed at the synagogue on Melidoni Street. When the synagogue

doors were closed, several hundred Jews (according to one version, between seven hundred and a thousand) were trapped inside, and all the detainees were sent to the temporary detention camp at Haidar (Haidari). See Michael Molcho and Yosef Nechama, *Shoat yehudey yavan* [The Holocaust of the Jews of Greece], Jerusalem, 1965, p. 152; Bracha Rivlin (ed.), *Pinkas hakehillot — Yavan* [Encyclopedia of the Jewish communities: Greece], Jerusalem, 1999, p. 80.

4. Agrinion — a farming town, capital of Karili prefecture in Epiros province.

5. Patras — port city at the western end of the Gulf of Corinth in the northern Peloponnese.

6. Haidar — a temporary detention camp in a suburb of Athens where Greek Jews were imprisoned before deportation by train to Poland. Many Jews in this camp were subject to brutality and robbery — including at the hands of Jewish extortionists — as well as starvation and humiliation before they departed in the trains for Auschwitz.

7. Preveza — port city south of Arta, capital of Preveza prefecture in Epiros. Upon arrival at Birkenau, the Jewish men from Preveza were selected for the Sonderkommando; they were murdered some time later and their bodies cremated by their successors in the Sonderkommando.

8. The man apparently belonged to the "Kanada" Kommando, a group of Jewish prisoners who worked in the looted property storerooms. Several members of this detail — men only — were on the camp platform when the transports of Jews arrived. They were required to remove the belongings of people in the transports from the cars and organize the Jews into two groups — men in one, women and children in the other — before the *Selektion* that would be conducted on the platform. The "Kanada" Kommando prisoners were the first people to encounter the Jews when they arrived at Auschwitz and on rare occasions had a chance to make brief verbal contact with them, warning them and giving them essential advice, at great personal risk. Some even managed to save young Jewish women with babies by taking the infants and giving them to older women. The unwritten custom was that women with small children or infants were automatically sent to the gas chambers. The instructions and advice, which were sometimes matters of life and death, were delivered in a few words, a whisper in an ear, and, by and large, were not properly understood by the new arrivals because time was short and no more could be said under the Germans' watchful eyes.

9. *Selektion* — this term, with its deadly connotation of "selection for death," was first used by the Nazi doctors who were involved in the "euthanasia" program. In Auschwitz-Birkenau, where it denoted separation and isolation, the term had various meanings. Altogether, the selection procedure had seven goals:

1. Selection of newcomers from the transports on the platform. Only the "able-bodied" were selected as prisoners and brought to the camp barracks. The object of the selection was to separate potential workers from those to be summarily exterminated.
2. Selection in the camp. From time to time, prisoners were subjected to a selection next to the barracks where they lived, in order to examine their state of health and ability to continue working. The object of the selection was to be rid of prisoners who were of no use and who no longer had the strength to work.

3. Selection in the hospital. Ill prisoners in the quarantine block were examined by SS doctors to ascertain their chances of recovery. "Hopelessly ill" prisoners, those who were still not "able-bodied" after a certain time, were selected for death in order to make room in the hospital for new patients.
4. Selection for labor details—in barracks where there were new prisoners or during roll calls, some prisoners were selected to fill the ranks of certain labor details. The object was to fill particularly difficult positions in details that had a bad reputation and which all of the prisoners tried to avoid.
5. Selection in the proximity of murder facilities. The Germans tried to identify and remove individuals from transports who seemed restless, suspicious, or agitated, and who might upset the undisturbed nature of the industrialized mass killing process. Such people were removed from their groups and shot where they could not be seen by the others. The object was to dispose of people who might disrupt, delay, or sabotage the orderly progression of the extermination operation.
6. Selection as a precaution. Sometimes prisoners who were suspected of having discovered a secret were selected and murdered to keep the secret from leaking out or becoming known.
7. Selection in "family camps." To isolate prisoners who were to be moved to other parts of the camp and to be kept alive for the time being, while others in the same camp were being condemned to death. Apart from these prisoners, who were taken out, all people in the "family camps" were doomed to extermination.

There were no fixed criteria for *Selektionen,* which the Germans on the whole conducted in an arbitrary and superficial manner. They were performed by SS doctors, SS supervisors, and SS men from the Political Department.

10. Ioannina (Janina)—capital of Epiros province in northwestern Greece, located at a crossroads.

11. Trikala—an important town in the eastern part of Thessalía province, on the Aheloos river.

12. Volos—port city in Thessalía province, capital of Magnisia prefecture.

13. This refers to the quarantine camp at Birkenau, Sector BIIa. The camp operated from late August 1943 to early November 1944. Some 32,000 prisoners, mostly men, at least half of them Jewish, spent time there. Prisoners stayed in the camp for anything from a few days to several weeks. Some 2,000 prisoners died in the camp; approximately 4,000 were "selected" and sent to the gas chambers. Another 4,000 were sent to the camp "hospital" in sector BIIf. There were, on average, some 5,000 people in quarantine at any one time. Some of the barracks of the camp have been preserved and some have been restored in recent years.

The official reason for quarantining new prisoners was to ensure that they did not have infectious diseases. In fact, the SS wanted the newcomers to grasp the camp arrangements and rules quickly and to train them to be obedient and totally submissive.

14. Ya'akov Gabai—lived in Israel and died at Neveh Yamin in October 1991. His brother, Dario, lives in Los Angeles.

15. Shaul Chazan—see Chapter 6.

16. There were several pairs of brothers in the Sonderkommando. Shlomo (Bruno)

Venezia now lives in Rome. His brother, Maurice, lives in Los Angeles. Other brothers in the Sonderkommando were Moshe Weinkrantz and his brothers; Ya'akov and Dario Gabai; Moshe, Mordechai, and Ya'akov Mocca; Abraham and Shlomo Dragon; the four Yahoun brothers; Barko and Izl Tapper; Velvel and Moshe Fuchs; Abish-Lajb and Hersch Kornick; the Gozhik brothers, and others.

17. Leon Cohen died in Bat Yam, Israel, in 1989. See Chapter 7.

18. "Camp D" (*d-Lager*)—this term refers to sector BIId in Birkenau, a "protective detention camp" until mid-July 1943 and a camp for male prisoners afterwards.

19. The term "bunker" was used for several facilities and sites in Auschwitz camp. The witness is referring here to the first temporary killing facilities in Birkenau, which were called "bunkers"—Bunker I and Bunker II—where tens of thousands of people were murdered and cremated from May 1942 on. Bunker I, also known as the "Red House," was first used on May 4, 1942. By the summer of 1943, when operations there ceased, 50,000 to 80,000 people had been murdered in Bunker I. After Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] were opened and activated, Bunker I was demolished. Bunker II—the "White House"—operated from July 1942 until the summer of 1943 and from May 1944 until September 1944. It is estimated that some 100,000 people were murdered there.

The word "bunker" was also used to denote the cellar in Block 11 in Auschwitz (the "death block") and, at times, the large pits in Birkenau where the bodies of those killed were cremated.

As for the origin of the term, the buildings or halls given this name were reminiscent of a bunker in the broad sense of the word, i.e., a sealed, fortified structure that protects those inside from external attack. For example, the gas chamber in the old crematorium in the Auschwitz camp and the cellar in Block 11 were such buildings; neither had windows and they could both be hermetically sealed. Areas that did have windows but could be sealed with massive doors were also sometimes called bunkers.

20. In other words, there was nothing above the roof of the gas chamber, so it was easy to carry the gas canisters to the openings through which the gas was thrown and to open their lids. Nothing was built over the roof of the gas chamber (in this crematorium and its twin) apart from the ground and the openings.

21. The chimney was 15.46 meters high.

22. The Sola, a tributary of the Vistula.

23. It was only in May 1944, when the transports of hundreds of thousands of Jews from Hungary began, that trains started arriving inside the Birkenau camp and stopping not far from the murder facilities. Until then, Jews disembarked on a siding at the old "ramp" between Auschwitz and Birkenau, in the vicinity of the freight unloading platforms at the Auschwitz station. The platform was subsequently known as the Jewish platform ("die Judenrampe") and later, when the new platform was completed at Birkenau, as the old Jewish platform. The new platform was built between sectors BI and BII.

24. Kapo—a prisoner appointed by the Germans to be responsible for a unit or labor detail in or near the camp. In Auschwitz and its satellite camps, the position was held by non-Jews and Jews. In a large labor detail that had many Kapos, a head Kapo (*Oberkapo*) was appointed. There are various explanations as to the origins of the name. One of the least known is that it is an acronym formed from *Kameradschafts-Polizei*, literally a "police force of peers"—a reasonable explanation, given the policing function of the job.

25. In his testimony written in prison in Poland, the camp commandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höss, writes "Most of all, they [the Sonderkommando] tried to calm those who seemed to guess what was ahead. Even though they might not believe the SS soldiers, they would have complete trust in those of their own race. . . . It was interesting to see how the Sonderkommando lied to them and how they emphasized these lies with convincing words and gestures." Steven Paskuly (ed.), *Death Dealer: The Memoirs of the SS Kommandant at Auschwitz, by Rudolph Höss*, New York, 1996, p. 158.

26. The witness refers to one of the toughest moral problems faced by members of the Sonderkommando: Was it their duty to tell the victims what awaited them and to warn them? According to the testimonies, members of the Sonderkommando usually preferred not to tell the victims the truth. One of the main reasons for their decision was as follows: Since there was no way to save the doomed Jews, it was better for them not to know what awaited them. Thus, they would be granted a few more moments of comfort and be spared the mental anguish, tension, anxiety, and panic that they would suffer were they to know the bitter truth. The men of the Sonderkommando considered this a final small act of grace that they could provide these condemned Jews in advance of their death.

27. The "Kanada" Camp—see Chapter 1, note 45.

28. The witness may be referring to Lajb Langfus, the *dayan* (rabbinical judge) from Makow Mazowiecki, who was a member of the Sonderkommando. To enable him to write his historical accounts undisturbed, his comrades in the Sonderkommando excused him from most of the regular work in the crematoria; he was employed mainly in disinfecting and preparing women's hair for shipment to Germany. Some of Langfus's writings were found after the war. About Langfus, see Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommandos in Auschwitz: Coping with Fate and Reality," *Yad Vashem Studies,* Vol. 20, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 273–312.

29. In several interviews with the author in and after 1994, the Kapo, who was Jewish, vehemently denied the allegations made against him.

30. Cyanide, one of the main components of Zyklon B, has a strong smell of bitter almonds.

31. Several factors may explain the entanglement of bodies in the gas chambers: the victims' panic-stricken struggles for air in the gas chamber; their tendency to cling to family members at the moment of death; and the severe overcrowding inside the chambers.

32. Death by asphyxiation and convulsion is painful. The level of suffering depends on the concentration of gas and the pace of injection into the space where the person being asphyxiated is situated.

33. There was also a hierarchy among Jewish prisoners in the camp, including members of the Sonderkommando.

34. The first transport from Hungary reached Birkenau on May 16, 1944.

35. The last transport to Birkenau from Theresienstadt arrived on October 30, 1944, with 2,038 Jews, of whom 1,689 were immediately murdered in the gas chambers.

36. The last remaining ghetto in Poland was in Lodz. The last transport for Auschwitz left the ghetto on August 30. A total of 74,000 residents of the ghetto were deported.

37. The exact date of Himmler's order to stop the gassing is not known. It was apparently some time in November 1944 and no later than November 25. The last gassing in

Auschwitz-Birkenau probably took place on November 2, 1944. The systematic dismantling of the crematoria and murder facilities began on November 25, 1944. In the first stage, Crematoria I [II] and II [III] were destroyed. (Crematorium III [IV] had already been demolished and Crematorium IV [V] was to continue operating as a crematorium for the bodies of prisoners who died in the camp.)

38. Auschwitz I was the main camp (*Stammlager)*. Auschwitz II was Birkenau, and Auschwitz III was Buna-Monowitz. These were the main components of Auschwitz; the main camp alone had thirty-nine subcamps (*Nebenlager*). This division of the Auschwitz camp complex into three organizational units was in effect only from November 1943.

39. Mauthausen—a concentration camp about five kilometers from Mauthausen in Upper Austria, built near an abandoned stone quarry. Prisoners were first brought to the camp on August 8, 1938. Most inmates during the first year were chronic criminals and "asocial" elements; management positions in the camp were given to them. An edict by Heydrich on August 19, 1942, placed Mauthausen in the highest category of severity among Nazi camps.

Until mid-May 1940, most prisoners in Mauthausen were German. Afterwards, thousands of Poles and Czechs, Spanish Republicans, and Soviet prisoners of war were brought there. From the fall of 1943, most prisoners in Mauthausen were sent to work in the military industries in the area. Their main task was the construction of underground chambers where plants for the assembly of missiles and the manufacture of aircraft parts were to be established.

Until the spring of 1941, few Jews had been sent to Mauthausen and most of them had died soon after their arrival from labor in the quarry or from brutal treatment. From then on, groups of Jews from Czechoslovakia and the Netherlands began arriving. The groups became much larger in mid-1944 and their places of origin changed: Hungary, the Plasow camp near Krakow, and Auschwitz. The Germans discriminated against the Jews in various ways, treating them more brutally than they did other prisoners and giving them much inferior living conditions. They assigned the Jews to the excavation of tunnels for the munitions plants. Within a month or two, Jewish prisoners who had arrived in the camp hale and hearty were broken men who could hardly stand.

When the general evacuation of Auschwitz began on January 25, 1945, a second wave of transports, in which the Jews were the majority, began to arrive. Like their predecessors, they were sent to work excavating underground passages in various satellite camps. The last large group sent to Mauthausen was composed of Hungarian Jews.

In the second half of 1944, the stream of prisoners sent to the camp increased and at the end of February 1945 there were 83,399 prisoners. The death rate soared. At least 24,613 prisoners died between January and May 1944. Shortly before the camp was liquidated, the Jewish prisoners were transferred to the Gunskirchen camp. It is estimated that 199,404 prisoners passed through Mauthausen and that 119,000 prisoners, including 38,120 Jews, perished in Mauthausen and its satellite camps.

40. Melk—a concentration camp on the banks of the Danube in Lower Austria and a satellite camp of Mauthausen. It began operating on April 21, 1944. The prisoners were employed under harsh conditions and under a cruel regimen in digging a system of underground chambers for munitions plants. In January 1945, there were more than ten thousand prisoners in the camp. Between April 1944 and April 1945 about half of the

prisoners died due to cruel treatment and inhuman conditions. After June 1944, a large number of Jews of Hungarian and Polish origin were brought to Melk from Auschwitz. In mid-April 1945, the remaining prisoners were evacuated to Mauthausen and Ebensee.

41. Ebensee—a concentration camp at the foot of the Upper Austrian Alps and a satellite camp of Mauthausen. The prisoners in this camp, which began operating on November 18, 1943, excavated a system of tunnels under the mountains to establish a missile development facility. At its peak, the camp had a prisoner population of more than eighteen thousand. Thousands of them—some eleven thousand over an eighteen-month period—died from abuse, starvation, and disease. The first Jews arrived in early June 1944. They had a higher mortality rate than any other group of prisoners as a result of ill-treatment, hunger, and draconian punishments.

42. He is referring to the Displaced Persons (DP) camps, where Holocaust survivors were assembled to wait until arrangements to leave Europe and emigrate to Palestine or other countries could be made for them.

43. Atlit was a detention camp for "illegal" immigrants that the British established on the Mediterranean coast in the late 1940s during the Mandate era.

Chapter 3. Abraham and Shlomo Dragon

1. Zuromin—a town about one hundred kilometers northwest of Warsaw in northern Mazowsze. On the eve of the Holocaust, some three hundred Jewish families lived there.

2. The Germans particularly enjoyed implementing their decrees on Jewish festivals and observances. Witness testimonies from various locations recount that the Germans specifically chose the Day of Atonement and other festivals for deportations, public executions, and other harsh measures.

3. The Germans tended to concentrate Jews from small towns and villages in cities so that they could supervise and control them more effectively. Consequently, the Jewish populations of urban centers increased perceptibly, thereby adding to the crowding and deprivation.

4. The Warsaw ghetto was sealed on November 15, 1940. From then on, Jews were forbidden to leave the ghetto without a special permit.

5. The rations that Germans provided for ghetto residents were meager, poor in quality, and inadequate to assure adequate nutrition. This led to physical and mental deterioration, the spread of epidemics, and rampant mortality. Due to the perpetual malnutrition, the ghetto inhabitants had to smuggle food from non-Jewish parts of the city. Adolescents and children were often involved in these smuggling activities. Many Jewish smugglers were injured when the German patrols took shots at them. Due to the burgeoning ghetto population, smuggling of food could not save the Jews from starvation in the long term. As the smuggling network developed, certain Jewish elements in the ghetto used it to enrich themselves. See Yisrael Gutman, *The Jews of Warsaw, 1939–1943: Ghetto, Underground, Revolt. Bloomington,* 1982, pp. 66–72.

6. Until February 1941, two streetcar lines marked with a Star of David ran through the northern part of the Warsaw ghetto in a north-south direction. From February on, only one line operated. The new transport service—horse-drawn carts—began operating in the ghetto on June 18, 1941. Residents of the ghetto called these "streetcars," which

operated chiefly in the southern part of the ghetto, "Kon Hellerke" after the owners, and "Heller." The carfare was sixty groszy.

For some time after the Warsaw ghetto was established, Polish streetcars from the "Aryan" side still crossed the Jewish area. At first they ran along Leszno Street and then Chlodna Street. They were not allowed to stop in the ghetto. Survivors of the ghetto report that food and other items were sometimes thrown from the carriages as they rushed through the ghetto streets; this was part of the well-developed smuggling operation that was designed to feed the starving ghetto population.

7. Plonsk—a town in Plonsk subdistrict of Warsaw district, settled by Jews in the fifteenth century. The Jews of Plonsk were proud of several leading personalities who had been born there, the most noteworthy being David Ben-Gurion, whose father, Avigdor Gruen, was one of the community's leading Zionists. Almost all the Jews in Plonsk—some five thousand of them—perished in the Holocaust, most of them in Auschwitz.

8. Mlawa—a town in the Plock subdistrict of the Warsaw district, settled by Jews in the sixteenth century. On the eve of the Holocaust, the town had a Jewish population of six thousand. Most were transported to Auschwitz and Treblinka, where they were murdered.

In Auschwitz, the Jews of Mlawa organized a mutual assistance group of people from Ciechanow and the vicinity and were active in the resistance movement in the camp. Notable among them were Moshe Bielowicz and Aryeh (Leibek) Braun of Rypin, who had attended the Jewish high school and belonged to the Ha-shomer ha-Tsa'ir youth movement in Mlawa. Bezalel Czeslaw (Mordowicz) of Mlawa managed to escape from Auschwitz on April 27, 1944, together with a Slovak Jew named Arnost Rosin, who had been in the Sonderkommando briefly, and the two gave the free world a detailed, accurate account of what was happening in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

9. The tasks of gathering the bodies of those who had died en route to the camp and removing them from the cars were assigned to the "Kanada" Kommando. As explained in Chapter 1, this was only part of their labor. They also had to collect all belongings brought to the camp and sort them into groups of particular types of articles. They were also required to help prepare new arrivals for the *Selektion*.

10. When transports arrived in the evening and at night, powerful searchlights were used to terrorize and intimidate the new arrivals and instill an atmosphere of confusion, insecurity, and physical distress.

11. The German term for the person who did this duty—a clerk and secretary—was *Schreiber*.

12. The *Blockälteste* (barracks or block elder) was himself a prisoner and was appointed by SS men to be in charge of the prisoners' barracks. Notwithstanding his title, he was usually a young man in his twenties or thirties. Some block elders were Jews. When transports of Jews from Slovakia began to arrive in March 1942, the Germans chose young women to be block elders. Many testimonies of Auschwitz survivors indicate that these young women were sometimes unnecessarily cruel to the female prisoners in their charge.

13. The reference is to Eliezer (Ace) Grünbaum, the son of the well-known Polish Zionist leader Itzhak Grünbaum. The son was transported to Auschwitz from France. In Auschwitz, he was appointed block elder. What he did there has remained a controversial issue to this day; many survivors accused him of dreadful cruelty. Eliezer Grünbaum

perished in combat at Ramat Rahel (a kibbutz south of Jerusalem) in Israel's War of Independence. For further information about him, see Index: "Berger (Azriel Grynbojm)," in Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* Tel Aviv, 1985, p. 297. For details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

14. The witness is referring to Otto Moll of the SS, who was in charge of Bunkers I and II and of the Sonderkommando in December 1942 and in charge of all crematoria and gassing facilities in Birkenau, including the cremation pits, from May to September 1944. He was in charge of the Sonderkommando by virtue of his position. From September 1943 until March 1944, he was commander of the Fürstengrube camp, a satellite of Auschwitz, and from March to May 1944 he was commander of the satellite camp Gliwice I.

Moll was even more brutal than other SS men in Auschwitz-Birkenau; testimonies about his unbridled cruelty towards the Jews as they entered the gas chambers abound. On his orders, children were thrown alive into the enormous cremation pits that had been excavated behind Crematorium IV [V] in late August 1944. Moll devised the plan to obliterate traces of the crimes committed at Auschwitz and the satellite camps (the Moll Plan). He was sentenced to death by a military court in Dachau on December 13, 1945, and was executed on May 28, 1946.

15. The Germans forced the prisoners to strip during roll calls and on other occasions whether it was necessary or not, mainly to humiliate them and make them vulnerable and helpless. "Now a naked and barefoot man," writes Primo Levi in *The Drowned and the Saved* (New York, 1989, pp. 113–114), "feels that all his nerves and tendons are severed: he is helpless prey. Clothes, even the foul clothes distributed, even the crude clogs with their wooden soles, are a tenuous but indispensable defense. Anyone who does not have them no longer perceives himself as a human being but rather as a worm: naked, slow, ignoble, prone on the ground. He knows that he can be crushed at any moment."

16. The "Sauna"—initially, in early 1942, the Germans began to build a "disinfection building" in BIb at Birkenau. It was called the "bathhouse" at first, and later, from October 1942, the Sauna. The building was completed in May 1942. Newly arrived prisoners were brought there and ordered to strip, hand in all their possessions, and shower. Then they were given prisoners' uniforms. In many instances, the prisoners had numbers tattooed on their arms at the same time. Prisoners' uniforms were occasionally brought to the Sauna for disinfection.

After the BIId men's camp was completed, the Sauna continued to be used for newly arrived prisoners until a new Sauna could be completed. Construction of the "central" or "new" Sauna, opposite the "Kanada" II camp, began in 1943. The new facility began operating in December 1943. It was used primarily for disinfecting new prisoners, as a bathhouse for veteran prisoners, and a place to disinfect prisoners' clothing and belongings confiscated from prisoners.

17. Tattooing began in the autumn of 1941, when the Germans began murdering Soviet prisoners of war. Due to the difficulty in identifying their bodies, prisoners who were put to death had numbers marked on their chests in ink. However, this was only a temporary solution. The camp administration proposed tattooing as a permanent solution to the problem of identifying the bodies of those murdered. The proposal was

accepted and thousands of Soviet POWs were branded with a metal stamp on the left side of their chests.

Branding the bodies of Jewish prisoners in Birkenau was introduced in March 1942. Other parts of the upper body, such as the neck, were also used at the time.

Since branding was not efficient, tattooing with needles was introduced in 1942—initially in a crude, rough way. In most cases, it was done on the outside of the left forearm and, in some cases in 1943 and 1944, on the inside of the left forearm.

All prisoners registered in the camp were tattooed in the spring of 1943; from then on, all new prisoners were tattooed at the end of their intake process. Exceptions to the rule, i.e., people who were not tattooed, were "police prisoners," *Reichsdeutsche* (Germans who were citizens of the German Reich), "reeducation prisoners," "Jews in transit" or *Depotjuden* (these were Jews from Hungary who were kept in Auschwitz and then send to other camps in Germany), and Poles who were driven out of Warsaw during the 1944 uprising against the Germans in that town.

There were eleven series of numbers:

1. General series for men, 1–202,499. The series ran from May 20, 1940, to January 18, 1945. Not all men were tattooed. Jews were systematically tattooed with numbers until May 1944. Afterwards, it was done only partially, with the addition of a triangle, which was also tattooed. (This marking, too, was not applied in all cases.)
2. General series for women, 1–89,325. The series began on March 26, 1942, and ended on January 18, 1945. Not all women were tattooed. Some Jewish women were also marked with a triangle before May 1944.
3. Series A for Jewish men. This series began on May 13, 1944, and ended on August 24, 1944, and included numbers A-1 to A-20,000.
4. Series A for Jewish women. This series began on May 16, 1944, and ended on August 10, 1944, and included numbers A-1 to A-20,000. From August 10, 1944 until October 23, 1944, (and perhaps later), numbers A-20,001 to A-29,354 were given. By mistake, the Germans did not move on to the subsequent B series for Jewish women prisoners after they reached 20,000; instead, they continued to use the letter A.
5. Series B for men. This series began on July 31, 1944, and ended on November 3, 1944, and included numbers B-1 through B-14,897. Then came the following series:
6. Series R, which began at the end of October 1941 and ended on October 28, 1944, and included numbers R-1 to R-11,964. Some prisoners in this series had the letters "Au" tattooed before their serial number.
7. Series Z for men, from February 26, 1943, until July 8, 1944—numbers Z-1 through Z-10,094.
8. Series Z for women, from February 26, 1943, until July 21, 1944—numbers Z-1 through Z-10,888.
9. Series E for men. In this series, which began on February 1, 1942, prisoners were given the numbers E-1 through E-9,193. These prisoners were not tattooed.
10. Series E for women. In this series, as from 1943, prisoners were given the numbers E-1 through E-1,993. These women were not tattooed.

11. Series PH. As from February 12, 1943, numbers 1–3,000 were given to these prisoners, who were neither tattooed nor branded.

18. The *Strafkommando* ("penal detail"), also known as the *Strafkompanie,* had the toughest and most brutal discipline, regimen, and physical and dietary conditions. A significant percentage of prisoners condemned to this detail, which was designated for harsh labor, were murdered as they worked by foremen, supervisors, and overseers, or died from illnesses connected with the work, hygiene, and living conditions. These prisoners were totally isolated from other camp prisoners and were not allowed to receive or send any kind of mail or parcels. The average number of prisoners in the penal detail was five hundred. Between May 1942 and December 1944, the count came to approximately three thousand. On May 9, 1942, prisoners in the penal detail were moved from Block 11 in the main camp to Sector BIb in Birkenau, initially to Block 2 and subsequently to Block 1, and on July 15, 1943, they were moved to Block 13 in the BIId men's camp. Very few prisoners in the penal detail survived.

19. Members of the penal detail and the Sonderkommando were the most isolated of all groups of prisoners in Auschwitz and were not allowed to make any contact whatever with other prisoners.

20. Standing in ranks of five was a hallmark of roll calls in all types of Nazi camps.

21. The ostensibly innocent sign was designed to lull the victims and silence the suspicious and doubtful among them. Signs of this kind were posted in all the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. Lies, deception, and deceit were efficient weapons in the Germans' efforts to dupe and mislead their victims.

22. The hut—next to Bunker I were two portable stables, 41 meters long and 11 meters wide, that served as undressing rooms. Some four hundred to six hundred people could undress in these sheds. At first there were also two undressing sheds next to Bunker II. From June 1944 on, three stable-type sheds were used as undressing rooms.

23. Use of the Red Cross emblem on the car that delivered the canisters of the deadly gas was typical of the Germans' depraved and cynical methods of deception.

24. That is, the gas chamber.

25. The pathologist Miklos Nyiszli tells a similar story, in which Moll orders the shooting of a Jewish teenage girl who was still breathing when brought out of the gas chamber. See Nyiszli, *Auschwitz: a Doctor's Eyewitness Account,* New York, 1973, pp. 88–93.

26. At the Germans' behest, the Sonderkommando performed various tasks to obliterate traces of the crime that had been committed so that the people in subsequent transports would see nothing to arouse their suspicions.

27. The crucial actions in the murder process were always performed by Germans. No member of the Sonderkommando ever threw the contents of the Zyklon B canisters into the chamber.

28. The speaker is referring to the *Effektenlager*, better known as "Kanada," where the belongings of people taken to Auschwitz were gathered and sorted. See Chapter 1, note 45.

29. The prisoner assigned to barrack room duty (*Stubendienst*) was responsible for cleaning the block and providing food for those living there. He was exempt from the other prisoners' duties and remained in the barracks most of the time.

30. Franz Hössler — an SS officer, director of the main mess in Auschwitz from 1940 to 1941. He was subsequently in command of the SS construction unit near Zywiec. In 1942–43, he headed the prisoner labor details at Birkenau and for this reason was in charge of the Sonderkommando. Afterwards, he directed the "Employment Department." He commanded the women's camp at Birkenau from August 1943 to January 1944 and from then until June 1944 commanded a satellite camp of Dachau. In June 1944, he returned to Auschwitz and was appointed camp commander (*Lagerführer*) of the men's camp. At the Bergen-Belsen trials in Lüneburg, he was sentenced to death by a British military court and executed in Hameln on December 13, 1945.

31. The nonreligious members of the Sonderkommando did their best under the camp conditions to help their religious comrades observe the religious commandments, particularly at festivals, even though it meant risking their lives.

32. The latrines at Birkenau were merely round openings in long concrete slabs with no partitions. Prisoners were not allowed to spend more than two minutes there upon each visit. They were allowed to go there at certain times or if authorized by the block elder or the prisoner-functionary responsible for the latrines, cynically called the *Scheissmeister*.

33. Block 11, the Sonderkommando quarters, was in Sector BIId.

34. We know of seven dates on which members of the Sonderkommando — an entire group or some members — were liquidated:

December 9, 1942: some four hundred members of the Sonderkommando — the full complement at the time — were taken to Crematorium I [II] at the main camp and murdered;

February 24, 1944: some two hundred members were transported to Majdanek, where they were murdered;

September 23, 1944: some two hundred members of the Sonderkommando were taken to the disinfection chamber of *Effektenlager I* ("Kanada" I) and murdered there;

October 7, 1944, the day of the Sonderkommando uprising: three hundred members of the Sonderkommando were to have been removed from Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]. In all, 452 Sonderkommando prisoners were put to death that day, including 280 of those who would have been taken out and murdered according to the original plan);

October 10, 1944: fourteen members of the Sonderkommando were taken to the cellar of Block 11 in the main camp and executed a few days late on suspicion of having been involved in the Sonderkommando uprising;

November 26, 1944: one hundred members of the Sonderkommando were taken to an unknown destination, apparently the Gross-Rosen camp (we have no further information);

January 5, 1945: the five non-Jewish Poles in the Sonderkommando were taken out and sent to Mauthausen, where they were murdered. A non-Jewish Czech member of the Sonderkommando was sent with them.

Several small-scale liquidations of Sonderkommando prisoners are believed to have occurred before December 1942, but we have no information about them because no member of the Sonderkommando at that time survived.

35. Franz Danisch, from Upper Silesia (Königshütte), a prisoner who was appointed to

several positions of command over other prisoners. From May 1944 he was, for a short time, the block elder in Block 1 of the penal detail in Sector BIb. Subsequently he became the elder of another block (number unknown). Afterwards he was a block elder in Sector BIb and, from July 15, 1943, in Sector BIIId. Abraham Dragon identifies him, perhaps mistakenly, as holding the higher post of *Lagerältester* (camp elder). See also Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Auschwitz Death Factory: Document on Auschwitz*, Oxford, 1966, pp. 248–250.

36. The speaker is referring to the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp, on the outskirts of Lublin.

37. Additional testimonies support this event. See *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 226, 230ff.

38. The four new crematorium buildings were turned over to the Birkenau camp authorities for operation at different times. Crematorium III [IV] was the first to become operative (March 22, 1943, followed by Crematorium I [II] (March 31, 1943), Crematorium IV [V] (April 4, 1943), and Crematorium II [III] (June 25, 1943). On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

39. The speaker is referring to the huts where the victims undressed before going to the gas chambers.

40. The two engineers, Walter Dejaco and Fritz Ertl, were tried in Vienna in January 1972. Both were acquitted.

41. In late June 1944, the Sonderkommando prisoners were moved into the buildings of Crematorium I [II] (in the loft), Crematorium II [III] (in the loft), and Crematorium III [IV] (in the undressing room and apparently also in the erstwhile gas chambers, which were no longer in use). Some 100 to 150 members of the Sonderkommando continued to live in Block 13 in the BIId men's camp.

42. The Sonderkommando men were assigned to permanent jobs but on occasion, when a large number of transports arrived, they carried out whatever tasks were required.

43. Jakob Kaminski—date of birth uncertain (between 1904 and 1911)—was from Sokolka in the Bialystok area. In November or December 1942 he was transported from Ciechanow or Bialystok to Auschwitz, where he was known as "the Lithuanian." In January 1943 he was appointed Kapo, and after the death of the head Kapo, August Brück, Kaminski was appointed to Brück's position (on December 27, 1943). One of the planners and organizers of the Sonderkommando uprising, Kaminski was murdered by Moll and his henchmen, apparently on August 2, 1944, after the Germans discovered his involvement in organizing the uprising. See *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 138, 163, 271, 272; and Kraus and Kulka, *The Auschwitz Death Factory,* pp. 256–258.

44. The testimonies about men and women undressing together are vague. Some witnesses report that, as a rule, women and children were sent in first and men joined them later. However, the procedures and the sequence of events changed from time to time. Obviously, making men and women undress together would incite agitation and resistance, but the Germans did mean to silence people by shaming them and to make their victims helpless and powerless in the critical moments before they were sent to the gas chambers.

45. Testimonies of the Sonderkommando survivors, backed by those of survivors from

the "Kanada" Kommando, indicate that valuables were occasionally found hidden in victims' clothing and footwear—in special pleats sewn in just before the transport, in camouflaged inside pockets, or in the soles of their shoes. Thus the deportees hoped to assure themselves resources for safety and rescue for moments of trouble.

46. The benches were designed to give the undressing room the appearance of an authentic, quiet changing room and to dispel the suspicions of those inside.

47. Eyewitness accounts of women prisoners in the "Kanada" Kommando, who worked near Crematorium II [III] and could see from their huts the contents of the gas canisters as they were thrown into the gas chambers, confirm the details of the testimony that we contemplate here (author's interviews with Chaya Rosenbaum and Tsippora Tahori in 1997 and 1998).

48. Sonderkommando prisoners who removed bodies from gas chambers report that many bodies were covered with blood and bodily excretions.

49. After a body is cremated, most of the remains are the parts that contain minerals, such as bones and teeth.

50. The witness is referring to the *Abbruchkommando* ("Demolition Detail"), which was responsible for dismantling and demolishing various buildings and facilities, mainly to save building materials and equipment for subsequent reuse.

51. Josef Schillinger—SS *Oberscharführer* in Auschwitz. He held various positions, such as *Rapportführer* (registrar), commander of the labor unit at the Chelmek satellite camp, and director of the mess at the men's camp in Birkenau. He was one of the Germans whose job it was to lead Jews from the platform ("ramp") to the gas chambers after the selection. On October 23, 1943 (other versions: October 24, 1943), a young Jewish woman who had arrived (according to one account) from Bergen-Belsen that day shot him in the undressing room. Schillinger died of his wounds. The woman was, according to most testimonies, an actress, a dancer, or a singer—in any case, someone from the field of the arts. The incident is described in all testimonies of Sonderkommando prisoners, several of whom were eyewitnesses to it. The author asked all survivors whom he interviewed about this famous case and all of them, without exception, remembered it very vividly. Schillinger's death caused great joy among the prisoners, since he was considered exceptionally sadistic even by SS standards. His adjutant was also injured in the shooting but eventually resumed his duties in the camp.

For a document about the killing of Josef Schillinger that was written at that time, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 238; and compare the accounts of Zalman Gradowski in Chapter 1, p. 000, and Ya'akov Silberberg in Chapter 8, p. 000.

52. The secret journals of the Sonderkommando present an account of the murder of Jakob Kaminski. See *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 138, 163, 271, 272.

53. Moishe Burak—a typical nickname given to an SS man by the Sonderkommando. "Burak" means "beetroot" in Polish, and this man, Johann Gorges, probably had a red face.

54. "Kurzschluss"—the speaker apparently means Kurschuss, a sentry in the guard detail of Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V] whom the prisoners nicknamed Kurzschluss (German for "short circuit"). His identity and other details about him are unknown.

55. Steinmetz—the witness is mistaken. He must be referring to Steinberg, the SS *Oberscharführer* who was in charge of Crematoria II [III] and III [IV] in Birkenau.

56. This incident, which occurred on October 23 or 24, 1943, was described, with slight differences in detail, by all surviving members of the Sonderkommando. The Polish writer and former Auschwitz prisoner Tadeusz Borowski dedicated a short story, "The Death of Schillinger" (in Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentlemen and Other Stories,* New York, 1976), to this event.

57. This figure is inaccurate, of course. The Sonderkommando prisoners could not know the exact figures and those that they give are based on memory, estimates, and, sometimes, on writings that they read after the Holocaust. The number of Hungarian Jews murdered in Auschwitz was approximately 450,000.

58. The Gypsy camp—the first large transport of Gypsies reached Auschwitz on February 26, 1943, and a Gypsy "family camp" was established at Sector BIIe at Birkenau, where 20,000 people were housed. The population of Gypsies dwindled due to starvation, severe epidemics, and Dr. Josef Mengele's medical experiments on Gypsy twins. On August 2, 1944, 2,897 Gypsies were murdered in the gas chambers. After the transports of Hungarian Jews stopped arriving, all Gypsy women and children were murdered in the gas chambers. In all, some 6,000 Gypsies were gassed in an act of premeditated murder. Some Gypsy men were sent to forced labor camps or concentration camps, others were detailed to essential work for the war effort, and still others were inducted into the Wehrmacht to clear mines and perform other highly dangerous tasks. In all, about 13,000 Gypsies were murdered or died in Birkenau. The Gypsy camp was liquidated on August 3, 1944.

59. The "family camp" for Jews from the Theresienstadt ghetto was established in September 1943, when some five thousand Jewish deportees from Theresienstadt were transported to Auschwitz. Exceptionally, these Jews were not subjected to the *Selektion* process and the customary extermination of the "non-able-bodied." Instead, they were housed in a separate camp at Sector BIIb of Birkenau, where the men, women, and children were kept in one general setting, in contrast to the usual procedure in the rest of the Auschwitz camps. They also wore different clothing from other prisoners (i.e., they kept the clothes in which they had arrived) and their hair was not shaved off. Young children were even given better food and were allowed to stay and study in a special building (Block 31). Teachers and instructors who had acquired teaching experience at Theresienstadt taught children and adolescents.

In December 1943, another transport of five thousand people arrived; they were given the same reception and conditions and were sent to the same camp. The internal leadership of the camp, apart from the post of camp elder, was left to the Jews. None of the Jews in the camp, let alone other prisoners in the Auschwitz camps, knew why the inhabitants of the "family camp" received this special status. Other prisoners outside the "family camp" assumed that for some reason they were exempt from the extermination decrees that applied to other Jews who had been sent to Auschwitz.

On March 7, 1944, six months after the first transport arrived, all of the September 1943 arrivals were taken to the gas chambers and murdered in one night, without a *Selektion*.

In May 1944, another ten thousand deportees were brought in from Theresienstadt. In July 1944, the remaining inmates of the "family camp" were murdered in the gas cham-

bers, but this time there was some form of *Selektion*—the "able-bodied" were sent to labor camps in Germany—and the camp was liquidated in its entirety.

Recent research has made it clear that the purpose of the family camp of Jews from Theresienstadt at Birkenau was to provide a living refutation, as it were, of reports about the extermination of Jews who were being deported to the "east." The Nazis thought to accomplish this by presenting evidence such as postcards from Auschwitz, parcels via the International Red Cross that had been received, and the hosting of a Red Cross delegation at the camp.

60. Sonderkommando member Filip Müller confirmed this interpretation of events in his autobiography *Eyewitness Auschwitz: Three Years in the Gas Chambers*, Chicago, 1999, and in *Auschwitz Inferno,* Chicago, 1999, p. 106; and in his testimony in Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah*. See *Shoah,* New York, 1985, pp. 164–166, where the testimony of Rudolf Vrba on the subject is also included.

61. Zalman Gradowski—born in Suwalki, a town on the Lithuanian-Polish border, probably around 1910. He attended Tiferes Bachurim Yeshiva and was active in the Betar movement. After he married, he moved to Lunna, in the Bialystok area. An ardent Zionist, he dreamed of moving to Palestine with his family and even fixed a time for this: the summer of 1940. The war put paid to his plans. During the Soviet annexation, he served as a clerk in a government company. See also *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 156–159, 173–206; Nathan Cohen, "*Diaries of the Sonderkommando*," in Aharon Weiss (ed.), *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 20, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 276–280.

In November 1942, the Jews of Lunna were moved to a transit camp at Kielbasin, near Grodno, and in December of that year there were deported by train to Auschwitz. Gradowski arrived at Auschwitz on December 8, 1942, with his mother, wife, two sisters, a brother-in-law, and his father-in-law, who were taken to the gas chambers upon arrival. The Germans selected him for work in the Sonderkommando.

According to the testimony of Ya'akov Freimark, who came from the same town, it was Gradowski's job to cremate corpses in Crematorium IV [V]. At the end of every day's work, Freimark relates, Gradowski wrapped himself in his prayer shawl and recited Kaddish for the souls of the Jews who had been cremated.

Gradowski's own writings and the testimonies of survivors indicate that he played a key role in the preparations for the Sonderkommando uprising. Zalman Lewental described him as the leader of the uprising. Gradowski perished in the uprising.

62. The paper on which he wrote his memoirs was provided by Zalman Freimark, a prisoner at Auschwitz who worked in the "Kanada" Kommando. Freimark now lives in Herzliyya, Israel.

63. See above, note 34.

64. The speaker is referring to Lajb Langfus. See Chapter 2, note 28.

65. Henryk Mandelbaum—in the Sonderkommando he worked in Crematorium IV [V]. As of 1999, he was living in Gliwice, Poland.

66. Henryk Tauber was born on July 8, 1917, in Chrzanow, Poland. He was a merchant and one of a family of twelve. During the German occupation, he was forced to move to the Krakow ghetto, where the Germans arrested him in November 1942. On January 19, 1943, he was transported from Krakow to Auschwitz, where he was tattooed

with the number 90124. On February 2, 1943, he joined the *Krematorium-Kommando* in Auschwitz, where his job was to stoke the furnaces. On March 4, 1943, he was transferred to Birkenau with a group of fellow "stokers" who began to work in the *Krematorium-Kommando* of Crematorium II [III]. He escaped during the death march, survived the war, and has lived since then in France and the United States.

67. The reference is to the Majdanek concentration and extermination camp.

68. This happened in the aftermath of nineteen transports from Salonika to Birkenau, involving tens of thousands of Jews, that began on March 15, 1943. Few Sonderkommando members from Salonika survived.

69. Gross-Rosen—a concentration camp established in the summer of 1940 near a stone quarry in Gross-Rosen (Lower Silesia) as a satellite camp of Sachsenhausen. Gross-Rosen became an independent camp on May 1, 1941, and operated until the middle of February 1945. Prisoners there worked in quarries and munitions plants.

In its final stages, the camp held some 78,000 men and women. The number of persons who perished in the camp in the final stages and during the evacuation transports is estimated at 40,000.

The Jews were the largest group of victims. From the end of 1943 on, some 57,000 Jews were taken to Gross-Rosen, 26,000 of them women. From the main camp, the Jews were dispersed among more than fifty satellite camps; a large proportion of them were women. Jewish prisoners were subjected to particularly harsh living and working conditions and evinced a high mortality rate.

70. Most testimonies of Sonderkommando survivors include an account about the hurling of Karol, the German Kapo, into the furnace by the prisoners during the Sonderkommando uprising, with minor variations from one version to the next.

71. This is the same Henryk Tauber mentioned above. This was the name by which he was known in the camp.

72. Polkovnik—a military rank corresponding to colonel.

73. The three SS men who were killed on the day of the uprising were Rudolf Erler, Willi Freese, and Josef Purke. The camp commander promoted them posthumously (Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, Oswiecim, Document D-Au-1-1, Standortbefehl, Nr. 26/44, October 12, 1944).

74. Firefighters from the vicinity were also called in to extinguish the fire that had broken out in the building. The archives of the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum contain the testimonies of these firefighters: Sigmund Sobolewski (who now lives in Canada), Josef Holanicki (now living in Australia), Riszard Dacki, Tadeusz Fliss, Edward Sokol, Jerzy Radziwaczik (living in England), and Jan Nowicki.

75. Franz Danisch—see above, note 35.

Chapter 4. Ya'akov Gabai

1. Dario Gabai now lives in Los Angeles.

2. The Fascist government in Italy actually treated Jews in its areas of occupation humanely and decently and in a great many cases saved Jews or prevented them from being handed over to the Germans and transported to extermination camps. See, for example: Daniel Carpi, "The Rescue of Jews in the Italian Zone of Occupied Croatia," in

Yisrael Gutman (ed.), *Rescue Attempts during the Holocaust: Proceedings of the Second Yad Vashem International Historical Conference—April 1974,* Jerusalem, 1977, pp. 465–525; and Carpi, "Aid to Jews by Italians," in Yisrael Gutman (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust,* New York, 1990, pp. 729–730.

3. In several communities, conscription for forced labor was the stage preceding ghettoization and deportation to the camps.

4. Thousands of Jewish men from Salonika were put to hard physical labor and suffered beatings by Greek police. See Bracha Rivlin (ed.), *Pinkas hakehillot—Yavan* [Encyclopedia of the Jewish communities: Greece], Jerusalem, 1999, pp. 33, 38, 273–275; Michael Molcho and Joseph Nechama, *Shoat yehudey yavan 1941–1944)* [The Holocaust of Greek Jewry 1941–1944], Jerusalem, 1965, pp. 46–51.

5. On the eve of the Holocaust, there were 56,000 Jews in Salonika. See Rivlin, *Pinkas hakehillot—Yavan,* p. 32.

6. The Germans ordered the Jewish leadership of Salonika to advertise the notion that the Jews of the city would be resettled in Krakow and that the Jews of Poland would welcome them and meet all their needs. See Molcho and Nechama, *Shoat yehudei yavan,* pp. 78–79; Rivlin, *Pinqas hakehillot—Yavan,* pp. 278–279.

7. The Germans often deliberately lengthened the route from the point of departure to the extermination camp in order to sap the Jews' physical and mental strength before they even set foot in the camp. Consequently, some deportees were already dead or dying when the transport reached the camp.

8. Gabai heard about the death of the elderly, women, and children later, of course. Such information could have reached him only after he had become a camp inmate.

9. Sending the elderly, the ill, and the disabled to the gas chambers in trucks was another ruse designed to mislead those who had remained alive.

10. The quarantine camp—see above, Chapter 2, note 13.

11. Camp D (d-Lager)—the speaker is referring to Sector BIId, the male prisoners' camp from mid-July 1943 on.

12. Jakob Kaminski—see Chapter 3, note 43.

13. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

14. Josef Baruch—a Greek cavalry officer who worked at Crematorium I [II], where he was friendly with Lemke, the Kapo, who introduced him to the leadership of the uprising. Baruch died in the Ebensee camp several days before liberation.

15. The brothers Shlomo and Maurice Venezia are still alive. Shlomo lives in Rome; Maurice lives in Los Angeles.

16. Marcel Nadjari was born on January 1, 1917, in Salonika. He attended the Alsheikh French high school. When he matured, he worked in his father's shop, which sold animal feed. He was drafted in 1937 and fought against the Italians in 1940. In 1943, he fled to Athens and worked for a soap manufacturer. In October 1943, he left Athens and joined the Greek resistance. On December 30, 1943, he was arrested and taken to Averof Prison, where he spent the next month. Afterwards, he spent another two months at the Haidar detention camp and was then sent to Auschwitz. He survived the Holocaust, emigrated to the United States, and died of a heart attack in New York on July 31, 1971.

17. Daniel Ben-Nachmias—born in Salonika on June 26, 1923, died in Oakland, California, in October 1994. His family received Italian citizenship, so Daniel was able to

attend the Italian school in the city. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Athens on March 1, 1944, and was taken to Haidar prison two days later. On April 2, 1944, he and his family were transported to Auschwitz.

18. "Sauna"—see Chapter 3, note 16.

19. Sonderkommando survivors use the term "bunkers" to denote the pits. At times this substitution is erroneous. The "bunkers" were the gas chambers. The pits of which Gabai speaks were used to cremate Hungarian Jews who had been killed; they appear in photographs taken secretly by a Sonderkommando prisoner to warn the world, by means of first-hand reportage, about what was happening in Birkenau.

20. Body fat is solid but melts at high temperatures. The witness's description of how body fat becomes fuel when it liquefies is accurate.

21. The speaker is referring to Lemke Pliszko, who was also a Kapo (in Crematorium II [III]). He survived and now lives in central Israel.

22. Several pairs of brothers survived the Sonderkommando. See Chapter 2, note 16.

23. This civilized and refined behavior was not always typical of the conduct of SS men on the platform. There are testimonies about beatings of old men and women as soon as they disembarked from the train. See the testimony of Itzhak Cohen in "Saloniki-Auschwitz," radio program edited by the author, Israel Army Radio, 1987.

24. In addition to the four crematoria, Bunker II (the "Red House") and the large pits beside Crematorium IV [V] were in operation during the summer of 1944.

25. "Kanada" Kommando—see Chapter 1, note 45.

26. *Muselmann* (pl. *Muselmänner*)—the name given to exhausted, sick, and starving prisoners who had lost their will to live and had become walking skeletons who, withdrawn and detached from their surroundings, stared into space. Unable to stand for any length of time, they often toppled into postures that made them resemble Muslims at prayer. This is apparently the source of their name. *Muselmänner* could be recognized by their emaciated bodies, which looked like skeletons with yellowish skin stretched over them, and their numb, expressionless faces.

27. Gabai is referring to the Soviet commission of inquiry that visited Auschwitz shortly after the camp was liberated and spent two months (February and March 1945) investigating Nazi crimes there.

28. Zalman Gradowski's manuscript was buried in a similar manner under the soil at Crematorium II [III]. The excavators found an aluminum pot with a notebook of diaries and a letter, both in Yiddish. The notebook contained ninety-one pages. The two manuscripts and the pot were transferred to the Museum of Military Medicine in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), where they remain to this day. The manuscript was unearthed by Shlomo Dragon, who turned it over to the special Soviet state commission of inquiry into the Nazi crimes at Auschwitz.

29. From testimonies in our possession, it emerges that several Jews in every transport refused to obey the Nazi orders to strip naked. Some were willing to strip to their undergarments only. For observant Jews, the need to undress was particularly agonizing and entailed painful and harsh mental humiliation.

30. This transport from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz, which took place from August 7 to August 30, 1944, led to the final liquidation of the ghetto.

31. Several transports of children were sent to Birkenau, where all the youngsters were murdered upon arrival. For example, a transport of twelve hundred Jewish children left the Bialystok ghetto in August 1943 and reached Auschwitz about a month later. In another transport, three hundred Jewish children were brought from Kovno on September 12, 1944. All but sixty-five of them were gassed.

32. Several Dutch SS men were posted to the Birkenau crematoria.

33. Before they left the camp on the death march, the prisoners were searched meticulously so they could remove no effects or mementos. This may explain why literary and musical works written by prisoners in the camp were lost.

34. The order described here, according to which girls and young children undressed first, was not a hard-and-fast rule; some testimonies report a different order.

35. Large-scale corruption and theft were accepted norms among SS men in the camp, irrespective of rank. Since they were enjoined from taking victims' possessions, they usually availed themselves of Jewish prisoners in the "Kanada" Kommando or the Sonderkommando, whom they ordered to pilfer from the valuables that accumulated in "Kanada" I and II and in the crematorium buildings.

36. According to other testimonies of Sonderkommando survivors, the implement was made of a heavy block of wood.

37. The river was the Vistula or one of its tributaries, the Sola.

38. The testimonies in our possession indicate that the food found by the Sonderkommando in the undressing room sufficed to meet their own needs and could be shared with their friends, families, and acquaintances in the camp.

39. This "plenty" was available as long as transports arrived frequently. During periods when no trains arrived at the platform in Auschwitz, the Sonderkommando inmates had to make do with regular prisoners' rations.

40. Luxury conditions such as these were a means used by the Germans to win over the Sonderkommando men, make them forget the horrors of the day, and ensure "industrial calm" in the "death factory."

41. For years, Lemke (Shmuel) Pliszko refused to talk. In recent years, he granted the author's request and gave him several extensive interviews (audio and video).

42. Most Jews in Salonika spoke Ladino only and were not fluent in other languages. This was another reason why they suffered so much more in the camp. Their inability to understand the Germans and even their fellow prisoners compounded their hardships in Auschwitz and its satellite camps.

43. For details of the intervention of the general resistance in Auschwitz to reschedule the uprising planned by the Sonderkommando, see Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* Tel Aviv, 1985, pp. 227, 229–230, 233–234. For details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

44. The practical meaning of the order "go to the Sauna" was clear to the Sonderkommando prisoners, who consequently vehemently refused to leave the building.

45. Since details of the uprising remain vague to this day in the absence of eyewitnesses to most of the sequence of events, we have no proof that there was indeed an explosion in Crematorium III [IV]. It is more reasonable to assume that the rebels set the building afire. Erich Kulka believes that the smuggled gunpowder was not used to blow up the cremato-

rium. Kulka published a short article—his last—in Lore Shelley's book on the Union factory, *The Union Kommando in Auschwitz: The Auschwitz Munition Factory through the Eyes of Its Former Slave Laborers,* New York-London, 1996, pp. 303–305.

46. The witness's figures are inaccurate. During the crushing of the Sonderkommando uprising, the Germans murdered 280 members of the Sonderkommando from Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V], 171 from Crematorium I [II], and one from Crematorium II [III]—a total of 452 people.

47. As we know today, the explosives were provided to the Sonderkommando resistance by Jewish women who worked at the Union munitions factory. Four Jewish women were arrested by the Gestapo and hanged in Auschwitz on January 6, 1945. Three of them worked in the Union factory: Ella Gärtner (Gertner), Regina Safirsztain (Sapirstein), and Estucia Wajcblum (Esther Weisblum). The fourth, Rosa Robota, a prisoner at the *Kleidungskammer* (clothing stores), was the active figure and moving spirit behind the smuggling of the explosives. See Chapter 1, pp. 00–00.

48. Leon Cohen emigrated to Israel, settled in Bat Yam, and died in 1989. See his testimony in Chapter 7.

49. The gassings ceased on November 2, 1944. See Danuta Czech, *Auschwitz Chronicle, 1939–1945,* New York, 1990, p. 743.

50. Mauthausen—see Chapter 2, note 39.

51. Gusen—a satellite camp of Mauthausen that began operating on March 9, 1940. Prisoners there worked in quarries and in factories that turned out aircraft parts and machine guns. Gusen II and Gusen III were established in 1944; prisoners there excavated underground passages to the production halls of the munitions plants. The living conditions of the prisoners in Gusen were particularly harsh. The camp staff was made up almost entirely of criminal offenders. Prisoners were killed by injection of phenol, fatal beatings, gunfire, or—on occasion—asphyxiation in the gas chambers at Hartheim Castle. Of the 67,677 inmates at the Gusen camps, at least 35,000, including at least 2,000 Jews, died.

52. Melk—see Chapter 2, note 40.

53. Ebensee—see Chapter 2, note 41.

Chapter 5. Eliezer Eisenschmidt

1. Lunna—town in western Belorussia (Belarus) on the River Neman. Between the two world wars, it was part of independent Poland and in September 1939 it was occupied by the Red Army and annexed to the Soviet Union. The town was noted for its cultural wealth, vibrant Zionist activities, and well-developed and outstanding education system. The Tarbut system established Hebrew schools in Lunna. The Bund and the Zionist movement were the most prominent political streams among the adult population and even teenagers, who joined their affiliated youth movements. Most Jews in Lunna were merchants and rather well off. On the eve of the Holocaust, three hundred Jews lived there.

2. Grodno—a city in western Belorussia. It, too, was part of Poland until September 1939. The Jewish community in Grodno was one of the oldest and largest "Lithuanian" Jewish communities in this region, which until the eighteenth century had belonged to the kingdom of Lithuania. It had many active Jewish cultural and social institutions and was

an important center of the Hovevei Tsiyyon movement and later of the Zionist movement in Russia as well as of Hehaluts. On the eve of the Second World War, the town had a Jewish population of twenty-five thousand.

3. Western Belorussia was under Soviet rule, as agreed in the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact of August 23, 1939, from September 17, 1939, until June 22, 1941.

4. Nowogrodek—a town in western Belorussia that became the capital of its district because Poland's national poet, Adam Mickiewicz, had been born nearby. Between the world wars, it was part of independent Poland. In September 1939, it was captured by the Red Army and annexed to the Soviet Union. The first Jews to settle there arrived in the sixteenth century. On the eve of World War II, the town had a Jewish population of seven thousand. In the winter of 1941, the Nazis set up a ghetto in the town. Much of the Jewish population of the ghetto was murdered in *Aktionen* (Nazi operations conducted for punitive or deportation purposes). On September 26, 1943, several hundred Jews attempted a daring escape through a tunnel that they had been digging for several weeks. In all, 231 Jews managed to escape in this manner; most joined Bielski's partisans.

5. Zalman Gradowski—see Chapter 3, note 61.

6. Many survivors describe the tendency to keep the family together as particularly strong and significant during the Holocaust. The wish to stay with family members gave individuals strength and enhanced their ability to cope. Jews preferred to travel into the unknown with their families rather than take a risk and go their separate ways. The chances of rescue or escape were not considered sufficient to justify abandoning one's father, mother, or other members of the family. See Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, Tel Aviv, 1985, (writings of Zalman Gradowski), pp. 179, 194–195. For details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

7. In general, large wooden pails were used as latrines in trains, but they filled up rapidly and gave off an unbearable stench. Attempts to empty them outside the cars were not always successful and their contents spilled onto the floor of the car. Many Holocaust survivors relate to this as one of the hardest and most traumatic of all aspects of the trip.

8. The reference is to Sector BIIc in Birkenau, where 26,000 Jewish women from Hungary were interned from the summer of 1944 on.

9. The reference is to the various camps in Sector BII.

10. Those who worked at Bunker I belonged to Sonderkommando I.

11. At roll calls and special selections, having the prisoners strip naked was a standard procedure meant to humiliate them. See Chapter 3, n. 15.

12. The apportionment of men's and women's living quarters changed over time, but the parts of the camps were still known by the previous names.

13. The Sauna—see Chapter 3, note 16.

14. The penal detail—see Chapter 3, note 18.

15. The demand for professionals in the camp was often sarcastic. Obviously, there was no need for a real dentist to extract gold teeth from victims' mouths.

16. Makow-Mazowiecki—a town in the Makow subdistrict of Warsaw district. The earliest mention of the presence of Jews there dates from the second half of the sixteenth century. Approximately thirty-five hundred Jews from Makow-Mazowiecki perished in the Holocaust.

17. See Chapter 4, note 20.

18. This was done deliberately, as an act of cruelty designed to humiliate the victims. "The day in the Lager was studded with innumerable harsh strippings—checking for lice, searching one's clothes, examining for scabies and then the morning wash-up—as well as for the periodic selections, during which a "commission" decided who was still fit for work and who, on the contrary, was marked for elimination." Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved,* New York, 1988, p. 113).

19. Similar notices were found at other camps, such as Treblinka; their purpose was to mislead the victims.

20. Zyklon B had a bitter almond smell. See Chapter 2, note 30.

21. Miklos Nyiszli gives his version of this episode in his book *Auschwitz: a Doctor's Eyewitness Account,* New York, 1993, pp. 88–93.

22. For the dates on which the crematoria were activated, see Chapter 3, note 38.

23. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

24. Buna—a satellite camp of Auschwitz, directly owned by the I.G. Farben industrial concern and established on October 30, 1942. The name "Buna" was taken from the synthetic rubber that the company intended to produce as part of the war effort. The company obtained a license from Göring's office to set up a network of plants in the vicinity of Auschwitz to produce synthetic rubber and fuel for the German war industry.

It was planned from the outset that the prisoners in Auschwitz would work in these factories as slave labor and that the companies would pay the SS a minimal sum for each prisoner. In late April 1941, at Himmler's behest, the Auschwitz commander, Höss, set aside a quota of prisoners to set up the buildings for the factories at Monowice, a village some seven kilometers from Birkenau and four from Auschwitz. For months on end, thousands of prisoners performed this difficult labor, suffering from the brutality and tyranny of the SS men and various other supervisors. The prisoners who fell ill or became weak and could not satisfy their industrial taskmasters were sent to the gas chambers at Birkenau.

Buna was originally known as the "Buna subcamp." On November 22, 1943, after Auschwitz had been divided up administratively into three independent concentration camps, Buna-Monowitz became an independent concentration camp with its own commanders and ten satellite camps (Auschwitz III), and it was renamed "Monowitz labor camp" on December 1, 1943.

During the period when the Buna-Monowitz camp existed, thousands of prisoners—most of them Jews—sacrificed their lives in harsh labor from exhaustion, starvation, and infectious diseases, or were murdered in the gas chambers.

25. *Muselmann*—see Chapter 4, note 26.

26. The SS overseers coveted the best and most valuable items in the loot. Because they were forbidden to appropriate victims' property, they forced Jewish prisoners in the Sonderkommando to obtain various valuables for them. Thus they spared themselves unnecessary risk and the possibility of severe punishment.

27. According to the testimony of Henryk Porebski, a member of the electrician crew in Birkenau, Crematoria I [II] and II [III] had an electric ventilation system that evacuated the gas from the chamber to prepare it to receive the next transport. A similar system was

evidently also installed in Crematoria III [IV] and IV [V]. See Hermann Langbein, *Der Auschwitz-Prozess—Eine Dokumentation,* Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p. 93.

28. The people in the gas chambers excreted fluids because they lost control of their sphincters. This was due to hysteria among those crowded and trapped in the gas chambers and not due to the gas itself. It is a human response to the sense of danger of imminent death.

29. On the bombing, reconnaissance, and intelligence flights over Auschwitz, see Martin Gilbert, *Auschwitz and the Allies,* New York, 1981, Part 3, *Auschwitz Revealed,* pp. 190–339.

30. Sonderkommando member Buki Milton testified that the Sonderkommando barracks had an infirmary of sorts, so that members who fell ill did not have to be placed in the general camp "hospital." See Langbein, *Der Auschwitz-Prozess—Eine Dokumentation,* p. 249.

31. The reference is to Dr. Jacques Pasche.

32. Fuchs—the witness may be referring to *Oberscharführer* Voss of the SS, commander of the crematoria at Birkenau. We know of no SS man named Fuchs and the name does not appear in the documentation.

33. In Auschwitz, a black triangle denoted an "asocial" prisoner. Therefore, the reference may be to a green triangle, which signified a professional criminal (*Berufsverbrecher*).

34. The reference is to August Brück, who died of typhus in December 1943. Brück held the position of *Oberkapo* (head Kapo) and was also responsible for the mechanical functioning of the crematoria.

35. Bezdin—a town in Upper Silesia, Poland, founded in the Middle Ages around a castle. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Bezdin began to develop rapidly and attracted industrial plants because its vicinity was rich in iron and coal deposits. Jews settled there in the late Middle Ages. On the eve of World War II, the town had a Jewish population of approximately 27,000. During the German occupation of the town, the Jewish youth movements set up a headquarters for underground activities and prepared for an uprising. The Jews of Bezdin were deported to Auschwitz in May–August 1942. During the final liquidation, they defended themselves with weapons in several bunkers.

Sosnowiec—a city in southwest Poland that was a small town until the late nineteenth century. Its rapid development was due to iron and coal deposits in the area and its location at an international railroad junction. On the eve of World War II, it had a population of 130,000, including 28,000 Jews.

In Srodula, the Jewish ghetto of Sosnowiec, members of the youth movements organized and prepared to fight and defend themselves by hoarding weapons and building bunkers. During the general deportation and the liquidation of the ghetto, they defended themselves with the meager weapons that they had managed to amass.

36. Veteran prisoners in a concentration camp received preferential treatment from other prisoners and even from the SS. "Seniority" was very a meaningful factor in determining a prisoner's social status and rights. Veteran prisoners gathered entitlements and privileges and secured the best and easiest jobs, which assured them the continuation of control, personal influence and security, and sometimes even prosperity. Most administrative positions were held by long-serving prisoners.

37. Eliezer Eisenschmidt mistakenly presents the rank of the Kapo as lower than that of foreman.

38. Ciechanow—a town in the Ciechanow subdistrict of Warsaw district, in the Mazovia region. Jews first settled there in the middle of the fifteenth century; on the eve of the Holocaust there were some five thousand Jews in the town. During the German occupation, members of Jewish youth movements organized attempts at organized resistance, listened to the radio in secret, and passed on news of what was happening everywhere. Most Jews in Ciechanow were sent to Auschwitz and killed in the gas chambers upon arrival. Some played a distinguished role in the uprising movement in Auschwitz.

39. The Dutch members of the Sonderkommando whose names are known to us are Morris Schellekes (who died in Haifa some ten years ago) and George van Ryk, who now lives in Amsterdam.

40. Mlawa—see Chapter 3, note 8.

41. Plonsk—see Chapter 3, note 7.

42. These prisoners were housed in a concentration camp on the site of the former Warsaw ghetto known as Gesiowka, under unendurable conditions.

43. Brno—capital of the Moravia region of Czechoslovakia. The Jewish community there was established in the first half of the thirteenth century. Between December 2, 1941, and July 1, 1943, approximately 11,000 Jews were transported from Brno and the vicinity to extermination camps.

44. Nowy Dwor—a town in the Warsaw subdistrict of Warsaw district. Jews first settled there in the eighteenth century. Before World War II, the town had a Jewish population of forty-five hundred. By late 1939, only some thousand Jews remained; the others had fled to the Soviet Union or moved to Warsaw.

Most Jews from Nowy Dwor were murdered in Auschwitz. Quite a few Jews in the town were active in the resistance movement that fought the Germans in various places: the Warsaw ghetto, the Treblinka extermination camp, and the Sonderkommando uprising in Auschwitz-Birkenau.

45. Lomza—a town in the Lomza subdistrict of Bialystok district, on the left bank of the Narew River. Jews first settled there in the late fifteenth century.

In the Lomza ghetto, groups of young Jews carried out resistance and sabotage actions and one group secretly monitored radio news broadcasts from abroad. In mid-1942, some Jews in Lomza joined partisan units that operated as part of the Gwardia Ludowa (a military organization of the Polish Left). Most Jews from Lomza, some eight thousand in number, were sent to Auschwitz, where they perished.

46. David Olère—a painter and a survivor of the Sonderkommando. Born in Warsaw on January 19, 1902, he began to attend the Academy of Fine Arts at a very young age. In 1918, when he was sixteen, he left Poland for Danzig and Berlin, where he exhibited his woodcuts. In 1921 and 1922, he worked in Berlin as a painter, sculptor, and architect's assistant for the Europäische Film Allianz. He worked with Ernst Lubitsch and painted the sets of the film *Loves of Pharaoh*. In 1923, he settled in the Montparnasse quarter of Paris. He designed sets, costumes, and posters for the cinema industry. In 1930, he married and took French citizenship. The couple had one son, Alexandre.

On February 20, 1943, David Olère was arrested during a roundup organized by the French police in the vicinity of Drancy. He was held in Drancy and deported to Auschwitz on March 2, 1943. In Auschwitz, he was forced to dig graves at Bunker II. He joined the Sonderkommando in Crematorium III [IV] and was assigned to empty the gas chamber

and cremate bodies in the furnaces. Because he was an artist and was fluent in several languages, the SS exploited him for their own purposes: he wrote illustrated letters from them to their families, which he decorated with flowers.

On January 19, 1945, he set out on the death march. He reached Mauthausen, Melk, and Ebensee, where he was liberated by the Americans. After liberation, his health deteriorated. When he told his wife what he had witnessed in the crematoria at Birkenau, she thought he had lost his senses. These were the circumstances under which he produced seventy sketches that inspired the paintings that he created later. As his eyesight failed, he painted larger and larger canvases.

The sketches he made in 1945 and 1946 record the sights that had never ceased to trouble him; he produced them out of a sense of moral obligation. These sketches and paintings are of immeasurable documentary value as the first visual presentations of what occurred in the crematoria themselves. It is only through the hands and eyes of David Olère that the awful truth has been immortalized. His art flowed from an inner need to testify on behalf of those who never returned from the inferno. He also portrayed himself in some of his pictures—a ghostly figure who painfully contemplates the horrific scenes that would remain forever in his photographic memory.

Olère was the first to draw sketches and cross-sections of the crematoria at Auschwitz in order to confirm the reality of the death factory that he had seen in action.

David Olère died in Paris on August 21, 1985.

47. The "Maggid of Makow" was Lajb Langfus, who had served as a *dayan* (rabbinical judge) in Makow Mazowiecki. For details about him, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 168–171, 206–209; and Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommando," in Aharon Weiss (ed.), *Yad Vashem Studies*, Vol. 20, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 282–284.

48. The authors of the clandestine writings in the Sonderkommando knew that the soil at Auschwitz was moist and that they were risking their manuscripts by burying them in it. Therefore, they tried to find suitable containers for their notes and to seal them as best they could.

49. The infirmary camp at Auschwitz was Camp BIIf in Birkenau, which was a kind of hospital for prisoners. Prisoners who had been selected to die in the nearby gas chambers were sometimes gathered there.

50. Wolkowisk—a city in the Grodno area of Belorussia. The first Jews arrived there in the fifteenth century. The city was annexed to Russia in 1795, but was in Polish territory in the interwar years. A large yeshiva was founded there in 1887 and existed until World War I. When war between Germany and the Soviet Union broke out on June 22, 1941, several hundred Jews were killed in German aerial bombardments. During the German invasion, many Jews were massacred. The ghetto was established on December 13, 1941. Some two thousand Jews were murdered near Wolkowisk in May 1942. A Jewish underground movement contacted the partisans and organized groups to join them in the forests. On November 2, 1942, the Jews in Wolkowisk and the vicinity were surrounded and arrested. By the end of that year, 18,000 of them had been deported to Treblinka and the rest were taken to Auschwitz.

51. Gleiwitz (Gliwice)—a city in Silesia, Poland. It became part of Prussia in 1742 and was restored to Poland in 1945. Jews first settled in Gleiwitz in the sixteenth century. In 1932, the town had a Jewish population of 1,300. In May 1942, 586 Jews were trans-

ported to Auschwitz; all perished. Several hundred Jews remained in the town; they were liberated by the Red Army on January 26, 1945.

52. These nineteen Soviet POWs were brought from Majdanek to Auschwitz on April 16, 1944.

53. The four women were Regina Safirsztain (Sapirstein), Esther Weisblum (Estucia Wajcblum), Ella Gärtner (Gertner), and Rosa Robota. They were killed by public hanging in Auschwitz on January 6, 1945. See Chapter 1, pp. 00–00.

54. SS men took great pleasure in ordering a prisoner to bring some article from parts of the camp that were off limits to prisoners. When the prisoner returned from the proscribed area, the SS man would shoot him or her on the pretext that he or she was attempting to escape. This was one of the most common ways that sadistic SS men amused themselves.

55. The reference is to non-Jewish members of the resistance in the Auschwitz main camp. Initially, they showed willingness to cooperate with the Sonderkommando in a joint uprising. Gradually, however, they changed their minds and preferred to wait. The Sonderkommando diaries that were found in the crematoria compound show that the Sonderkommando members had to postpone the start of the uprising several times because of the attitude of the general resistance movement in Auschwitz. See *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 228–229, 233–234.

56. The reference is to members of the "Kanada" Kommando (those who worked in the *Effektenlager*). See Chapter 1, note 45.

57. *Scheisskommando* ("shit squad")—a detail of prisoners that was tasked with cleaning latrines. They were given this crude and vulgar name by the Germans.

58. The women's camp at issue was the "new women's camp" at Auschwitz I, officially opened on October 1, 1944, by the *Kommandantur* (HQ of the camp). One-third of the prisoners who were transferred to this camp from Birkenau were women who worked the day and night shifts at the Weichsel-Union Metallwerke factory.

The new women's camp comprised twenty buildings that were built close to the main camp and were called the *Lagererweiterung* ("camp extension"). On January 6, 1945, the four Jewish women accused of assisting the Sonderkommando uprising were hanged in the space between two of the buildings.

59. The hair of many Holocaust survivors went white prematurely. The traumatic events of the Holocaust caused this unusual occurrence.

60. Camp F—the reference is to Camp BIIf in Sector BII, which served as a "hospital" for camp prisoners from July 1943 to January 1945.

61. This is the death march, the final phase of the Holocaust, in which thousands of prisoners were forced to march hundreds of miles on foot during the winter of 1945. Many of them were shot by the SS along the way or died from the terrible cold, disease, exhaustion, or starvation.

62. Pszczyna, a town in the Pszczyna subdistrict of Silesia. The first Jews to settle there came from Bohemia in the seventeenth century. In the interwar period, Pszczyna had a very small Jewish community of twenty families. In late 1940, the Jews were deported to Trzebinia, where they shared the fate of the local Jews.

63. Yad Vashem awarded the Tendera family the title of Righteous among the Nations.

Chapter 6. Shaul Chazan

1. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

2. The Baron Hirsch quarter was built near the railroad station in Salonika. It was established in the early twentieth century by donations from Baron Maurice de Hirsch (1831–1896) to provide safe haven for refugees from the Kishinev and Mogilev (Mohilev) pogroms. It covered an area of thirty thousand square meters. By the eve of World War II, it was a slum quarter where the poor resided.

The Germans assembled the Jews of Salonika in this neighborhood before transporting them to Auschwitz. The living conditions in Baron Hirsch were unbearably harsh—during their final days in Greece before leaving for the extermination camp, the Jews endured congestion, deprivation in all senses, and beating by Germans and Greeks as well as by Jewish traitors and informers.

3. The transports from Salonika to Auschwitz began on March 15, 1943, and lasted for five months, until August 10, 1943. In all, 48,532 Jews were deported in nineteen transports. One transport was sent to Treblinka and reached its destination on March 28, 1943.

4. Organisation Todt—an organization in Nazi Germany that undertook large-scale construction projects, chiefly in the military and armaments field. It was named after its founder, the engineer Dr. Fritz Todt. In June 1933, Todt was appointed inspector general for road construction and in December 1938 he became plenipotentiary general for coordination of the building sector, as part of the Four Year Plan. He was also responsible for the construction of the *Westwall,* the system of fortifications along Germany's western border. After he died, the organization expanded and employed more than a million forced laborers, including foreign laborers, prisoners of war, and concentration camp prisoners. One of the best-known enterprises of the Organisation Todt was the construction of *Mittelwerk,* an enormous underground factory that manufactured missiles and aircraft engines.

5. Haidar (Haidari) camp—see Chapter 2, note 6.

6. Leon Cohen—see Chapter 7.

7. The "quarantine"—see Chapter 2, note 13.

8. Bunker—see Chapter 2, note 19.

9. Greek Jews were known for their fondness for song and music. We learned from the survivors that even in the camps they continued to pursue the tradition as best they could.

10. Flogging was a somewhat rare punishment for members of the Sonderkommando; it happened mainly during the period of their service at Bunkers I and II. When they moved to the new crematorium buildings, the Germans treatment of them changed beyond recognition.

11. Peppo-Josef Baruch—see Chapter 4, note 14.

12. On this subject, see Chapter 5, note 28.

13. When small groups of people to be put to death, they were shot; it was not considered worth activating the gas chambers for them.

14. The theory that, on average, women's bodies have more fat than men's is correct. Moreover, fat deposits occur in different places in men and women and in different quantities.

15. Apart from valuables, Sonderkommando prisoners were entitled to help themselves to victims' belongings.

16. Food, cigarettes, and even liquor were bartered between members of the Sonderkommando and the SS. In reference to certain members of the Sonderkommando who were heavy drinkers, Zalman Lewental writes they had no difficulty in satisfying their needs. See Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz*, Tel Aviv, 1985, p. 224. For details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

17. People with administrative functions, such as the block elder and the *Schreiber* (recorder of the movement of prisoners), generally had separate quarters.

18. The "Mufti" mentioned here is not the mufti of Jerusalem, Hajj Amin al-Husseini, but his nephew, Mussa Abdalla al-Husseini, who visited Auschwitz in 1944 accompanied by a German called Grobe. In 1951, the latter al-Husseini was responsible for the assassination of King Abdullah of Jordan. He was hanged in Amman. Author Jennie Lebel of Ramat Aviv gave me this information, for which I thank her.

19. Marcel Nadjari—see Chapter 4, note 16.

20. Daniel Ben-Nachmias—see Chapter 4, note 17.

21. Kapo—see Chapter 2, note 24.

22. On the organization of the resistance and the contact with the general resistance in the main camp, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 223–224, 227–228, 233–235.

23. Raoul Jahoun—there were three or four Jahoun (or perhaps Yahoun) brothers in the Sonderkommando, including Albert and Raoul. Raoul was shot by the SS before the uprising began. Albert died of pneumonia in the Ebensee concentration camp several days before the liberation. Yitzhak made a successful escape from Crematorium II [III] to Crematorium I [II] but was shot and killed during the death march.

According to Shaul Chazan, there were four Yahoun brothers. Raoul tried to escape from Crematorium II [III] and was shot. Henri died two hours before liberation in Ebensee (it is possible that Albert and Henri are one and the same). The fate of the other two brothers is uncertain.

24. In 1987, Shaul Chazan returned to Poland for the first time since the war and visited Birkenau with the author to prepare for the "Salonika-Auschwitz" radio program. The stairs that Chazan mentions are part of a large monument at Birkenau between Crematorium I [II] and Crematorium II [III].

25. Mauthausen—see Chapter 2, note 39.

26. Gusen—see Chapter 4, note 51.

27. Melk—see Chapter 2, note 40.

28. Of the sixty thousand Jews from Salonika who were taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau, between two and three thousand survived.

Chapter 7. Leon Cohen

1. Baron Hirsch—see Chapter 6, note 2.

2. Larissa—Situated in a wide valley, Larissa is the capital of Thessaly province and its largest and most developed city. It was the center of the Jewish communities of Trikala and Volos. The first Jews to settle in Thessaly appear to have arrived in the fifth century

C.E. Two hundred and twenty-five Jews from Larissa were transported to Birkenau; only six survived. One of those who perished was Alberto Errera, a former officer in the Greek navy who had joined the partisans during the war and been captured. Leon Cohen testified that it was Errera who had raised the idea of individual and group escapes from Birkenau. In the summer of 1944, he led a team of volunteers who took ashes from the crematorium to the Vistula and scattered them in the river. One day Errera struck an SS man and leaped into the river to escape, but was caught and shot dead.

3. The reference is to Rabbi Eliahu (Elias, Elijah) Barzilai, chief rabbi of Athens at the time. On September 21, 1943, Barzilai, who with great courage refused to submit to the Germans' incessant demands, was ordered by Dieter Wisliceny (SS *Hauptsturmführer* and organizer of the mass deportation of Jews from Greece) to draw up a list of all Jews in Athens including addresses and occupations, a list of all Greek Jews who had fled from Salonika to Athens between early 1940 and September 1943, and a list of all the Italian Jews from Salonika who had sought refuge in Athens. He was also ordered to provide a list of all persons involved in smuggling Jewish refugees from Central Europe to Palestine. Rabbi Barzilai immediately convened a general assembly of Jews of Athens in the synagogue. He reported to Wisliceny, informing him that he had been unable to obey his orders because he lacked a community archive and a staff to conduct the census. He reached an agreement with agents of the Greek resistance, whereby the latter pledged to help the Jews and protect them from the Gestapo. The rabbi and his family hid in the countryside until the liberation.

4. See Chapter 2, note 3.

5. Joseph Nehama—a banker who was well known in Salonika. He owned a valuable library that contained *Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) books in modern Hebrew from the post-Mendelssohn period. The Germans confiscated the library in April–May 1941.

6. Josef Mengele arrived at Auschwitz in May 1943, so it is definitely possible that he conducted the selection among members of Leon Cohen's transport, as Cohen describes. Any mention of Mengele's name should be treated with extreme caution, since many survivors reported encounters with him at times when he was not at Auschwitz at all. Additional SS doctors also performed selections at Auschwitz were, e.g., Klein, Thilo, König, Entress, Rohde, Kitt, and Helmersen.

7. He was probably a member of the "Kanada" Kommando.

8. Block 13 in Sector BIId of the Birkenau camp.

9. The reference is to Bunker II, which at the time was in partial operation in addition to the crematoria.

10. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

11. As the pace of inbound transports accelerated, there was appalling congestion in the undressing room and many victims had to wait outside. Under such circumstances, the Germans became increasingly irritable and sometimes treated the people violently as they entered.

12. In regard to the date chosen and its postponement, see Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* Tel Aviv, 1985, pp. 225–229. For details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

13. The actual figures were smaller. On January 18, 1945, 54,651 prisoners were evacuated from Auschwitz.

14. See ibid., pp. 228.

15. On Kaminski's death, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 229; and Ota Kraus and Erich Kulka, *The Death Factory: Document on Auschwitz,* Oxford, 1966, pp. 256–258.

16. On attempts to establish contact with resistance groups, see *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* pp. 133–138, where the plan for a general uprising in the camp and its failure are discussed; and Israel Gutman, *Anashim va-efer—Sefer Auschwitz-Birkenau* [People and ash—the Auschwitz-Birkenau book], Merhavia, 1957, pp. 121–133.

17. The siren always sounded when there was an attempt to escape the camp. See Rudolf Vrba and Alan Bestic, *I Escaped from Auschwitz,* London, 1964, pp. 209–210.

18. The reference is to the Kapo Karol, a *Volksdeutscher* (an ethnic German who resided outside the Reich). Karol's treatment of Sonderkommando prisoners under his authority was particularly cruel. During the uprising, the Sonderkommando had the rare chance to finish him off.

19. According to the testimonies of survivors, particularly the Polish firefighters, those who escaped were trapped in a granary at Rajsko, a satellite camp of Auschwitz, where they were murdered.

20. Prisoners in Crematoria II [III] and IV [V] did not play an active part in the uprising because they were unable to contact their comrades in the other two crematorium buildings while it was happening.

21. The gassings in the crematoria almost certainly ended on November 2, 1944. See Chapter 2, note 37.

Chapter 8. Ya'akov Silberberg

1. Zakroczym—a town in Warsaw district. Jews first settled there in the early fifteenth century. By the late eighteenth century, the town had one hundred Jewish families. The Jews owned industrial enterprises such as flour mills, textile mills, breweries, and tanneries. They were the main distributors of local industrial products and the buyers of farm produce from the peasants. The organized Jewish community was founded in the 1820s. A magnificent new synagogue, considered one of the largest and most ornate in the region, was dedicated in 1868. Rabbis from Zakroczym were renowned throughout Poland. The first Jewish public library was established there in 1907. A branch of the Zionist Organization was founded in 1916.

In the interwar period, a free loan society, a religious school for the sons of the poor, and a cooperative bank were established in Zakroczym, and existing societies, such as those for visiting the sick, accommodating the homeless, and providing hospitality were further developed. Almost all Jewish political parties in Poland, including the General Zionist, the Mizrachi (Torah va-Avoda, Ha-Shomer ha-Dati), Po'alei Tsiyyon, the Revisionists, Agudath Israel, the Bund, the Hehaluts youth movement, Ha-No'ar ha-Tsiyyoni, Betar, and Zukunft had branches in the town. Between the wars, the chief rabbi was Yitzhak Srebrenik. During that time, a Beth Jacob girls' school and a Tarbuth school were established and evening classes were held.

On the eve of World War II, there were roughly eighteen hundred Jews in Zakroczym. Once the fighting started, many Jews were killed or wounded, and most fled to Warsaw, Plonsk, and other towns in the vicinity or elsewhere. When the fighting stopped, about

three hundred Jews returned to the town. In late June or early July 1941, the elderly and those without residence permits were deported to Pomiechowek and in mid-November 1941 the remaining Jews were deported to the Nowy Dwor ghetto, where they shared the local Jews' fate. During the Nazi occupation, the synagogue was razed to the ground and the Jewish cemetery was destroyed.

2. Mr. Silberberg is probably referring to the start of the war.

3. Mr. Silberberg is referring to Rabbi Yitzhak Srebrenik, the chief rabbi of Zakroczym in the interwar era.

4. *Haynt* ("Today")—one of the most important Jewish newspapers in Poland, published in Warsaw in 1908–1939. It was founded by Samuel Jacob Jackon and two Zionist brothers, Noah and Nehemiah Finkelstein, as the successor to the daily *Yidishes Tagblat* ("Jewish Daily"), which they had published in Warsaw in 1906–1908. From the start, it appealed to persons of simple tastes. Over the years it became an important vehicle in the Zionist and national struggle of Polish Jewry, particularly after its merger with *Dos Yidishe Folk* ("The Jewish People"), the organ of the Zionist Organization. From 1921 on, the editor was Abraham Goldberg and policy was determined by Itzhak Grünbaum. In 1932, ownership passed to a cooperative made up of members of the editorial board and administrative and print workers. The last issue of *Haynt* appeared on September 22, 1939.

5. *Der Moment*—One of the most important Jewish newspapers in Poland, established in 1910 in Warsaw. Its editor was Zevi Prylucki, who brought in several reporters from *Haynt* (Hillel Zeitlin, H. D. Nomberg, and others), after which the two papers competed fiercely and incessantly. *Moment* was regarded as a nonpartisan paper that campaigned on behalf of the Jews' human and national interests. In its latter stages, it was increasingly influenced by Jabotinsky's Revisionist movement. Its last issues appeared in September 1939 (between Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur), after the German bombardments of Warsaw had begun.

6. Sochaczew—city in the Warsaw district. Jews first settled there in the late at fourteenth or early fifteenth century. The first Jews were moneylenders and leaseholders. From the eighteenth century, most Jews made their living from commerce and crafts. In 1860, a new synagogue with a *beit midrash* (religious study center) was built. (The synagogue was destroyed in World War II.) In the 1880s, the Jewish community became a Hasidic center that revolved around Rabbi Abraham Bornstein, the Sochaczewer rebbe. During his tenure, a large *beit midrash* was established where hundreds of worshippers came to visit him on the Sabbath and at festivals.

In addition, there were small synagogues (*shtiblach*) of the Gur, Amshinov, and Grodzisk Hasidic courts (communities headed by charismatic religious leaders). By the end of the nineteenth century, most Jews in Sochaczew were Hasidim.

The Jews of the Sochaczew took part in the Polish uprising in 1863. In the late nineteenth century, Hovevei Zion (proto-Zionist) groups were formed and a school that used Hebrew as its language of instruction, Hatehiya, was founded. A Jewish library was established in 1913. There were twenty-four hundred Jews in Sochaczew at the end of World War I and about three thousand by 1931. Between the wars, almost all Jewish parties in Poland had chapters there. The Zionist camp was led by the General Zionists and the Mizrachi; the two most noteworthy youth organizations were Ha-Shomer ha-

Tsa'ir and Betar. The Bund and its affiliated youth movement focused chiefly on trade unions and public information. Agudath Israel, affiliated to the Gerrer (Gur) Hasidim, set up the Tze'irei (Young) Agudath Israel and Bnos (Daughters of) Agudath Israel youth movements.

Jewish cultural life in Sochaczew flourished in the interwar years. In 1927, a Hebrew-language school (Yavneh) was founded and Agudath Israel ran the Beth Jacob girls' school and established a boys' school, Yessodei Hatorah. The Jewish library that had started up before World War I was also used for lectures and gatherings. The Jewish Association for Gymnastics and Sports was established and Jewish writers born in Sochaczew became renowned in the Jewish world.

The 1930s were marked by incitement and persecution by local anti-Semites: riots, desecration of graveyards, incitement, boycotts of Jewish commerce, blood libel, theft and robbery, beatings, and planting of bombs. When the Germans occupied Poland, there were twenty-five hundred Jews in the city. The Germans destroyed the Jewish cemetery and torched Jewish homes. In January 1940, a *Judenrat* and a Jewish police force were set up. On January 18, 1941, about nine hundred Jews from Sochaczew were deported to Zyrardow. The next day, the German authorities issued an order to set up a ghetto in the town. As they were forced to move to the ghetto, the Jews were permitted to bring only a few things with them. The ghetto was surrounded with barbed wire and guarded on the outside by German gendarmes and on the inside by Jewish police. For lack of space, more than five people tenanted each room. The food delivered to the ghetto was so inadequate that the inhabitants suffered from starvation. With the help of the American Joint Jewish Distribution Committee, the *Judenrat* set up a soup kitchen.

In February 1941, all the remaining Jews in Sochaczew were deported to the Warsaw ghetto, where they shared the fate of all the Jews interned there. In fact, they suffered more severely from starvation and disease than the locals did. Most of them died in the ghetto or in death camps during the great deportation in the summer of 1942.

During the deportations from Sochaczew, several dozen local Jews, mainly children, scattered in the vicinity but most were betrayed to the Germans by locals. Only a few Jews from Sochaczew survived the Holocaust.

7. Plonsk—a town in Warsaw district. The first Jews arrived in the mid-fifteenth century. The Jewish population began to grow in the eighteenth century and their economic life expanded greatly (trade in grain, timber, eggs, beef, and farm produce).

In the early nineteenth century, a unique experiment took place in Plonsk whereby Jews were settled in the surrounding villages and employed in agricultural and factory labor. Several Jews from Plonsk participated in the Polish uprising in 1863.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Hasidism made important inroads in Plonsk. The Gostyniner rebbe was particularly influential. Most boys were given traditional education and attended private religious schools—heder for the very young and Talmud Torah for those of primary school age.

Despite the material hardships on the eve of World War I, the Jews of Plonsk excelled in their vibrant cultural life and were involved in political affairs. In 1917, a Jewish public library opened in Plonsk and in 1918 a chapter of Agudath Israel was founded.

There were 4,460 Jews in the town at the end of World War I and 4,913 in 1931. Between the wars the town had a ramified Jewish education system and a number of

public associations were established: the Jewish Merchants Association, the Cooperative Credit Fund, the Cooperative Credit Bank, a free loan fund, and societies to visit the sick and accommodate the homeless. Various political parties and their affiliated youth movements were active at this time. Ha-Shomer Ha-Tsa'ir became an importance force in the town's Zionist activities. In Jewish public circles in Plonsk, the Zionist parties had decisive influence and initiated and administered most of the mutual help, education, and cultural projects. The Tarbuth association, founded in the 1920s, organized vibrant cultural activity and disseminated the principles of the Jewish Enlightenment. A perceptible upturn in anti-Semitism occurred in the 1930s.

The Plonsk ghetto was established in 1941. Some seven to eight thousand people—thirty-eight hundred of them forced to move from elsewhere—crowded into the ghetto. In July 1940, a *Judenrat* was formed with Abraham Jacob Ramek as it head. In May 1941, construction of the ghetto was completed and it was sealed. In the spring of 1941. The congestion caused an outbreak of typhus and, at the initiative of Drs. Eliahu Fenigstein and Artur Baer, a Jewish hospital, clinic, and pharmacy were established in the ghetto after prodigious efforts. The epidemic waned in April 1942. To combat the epidemic, a bathhouse under the auspices of the *Judenrat* sanitation inspector was set up in one of the religious study centers. The Plonsk ghetto served as a medical center for ghettos in the area that had no Jewish doctors.

In July 1941, twelve hundred residents of the ghetto were sent to the Pomiechowek camp. The first transport, made up of the old and the infirm, left Plonsk for Auschwitz on October 28, 1942, and subsequently additional transports left at intervals of approximately two weeks. There were four transports in all, each carrying some two thousand people. The last transport set out for Auschwitz on December 16, 1942, carrying young adults, skilled workers, and persons whom the *Judenrat* had considered "privileged," including the chairman of the *Judenrat,* his wife and two children, 340 children from the orphanage in the ghetto, and their teacher, a Mrs. Grünberg. All perished in Auschwitz.

In 1943, in Block 9 of the Auschwitz camp, a group of prisoners from Plonsk organized to fight the Germans and take revenge on a Kapo who had subjected Jews to abuse. They were in contact with a group of Soviet prisoners of war.

Almost all the Jews of Plonsk perished in the Holocaust.

The synagogues and religious study centers of Plonsk, as well as many Jewish homes, were destroyed during the Holocaust. After the war, two factories were built on the land where the Jewish cemetery had been.

8. The Jews in Plonsk knew what awaited them. News about the extermination of Jews in the camps was spreading by the summer of 1942, when the brother-in-law of Dr. Artur Baer, director of the Jewish hospital in the ghetto, appeared after having escaped from Treblinka with accounts of the extermination camp. Letters from the last days before the deportation, preserved in Emanuel Ringelblum's archives, lead us to the conclusion that the Jews of Plonsk embarked on their final journey with a sense of helplessness, acceptance of fate, and, perhaps, some hope that they might be lucky and stay alive.

9. Ya'akov Silberberg and his family were apparently on the transport that left Plonsk in the early hours of December 16, 1942, along with Ramek, the *Judenrat* chairman whom Mr. Silberberg mentioned in his testimony.

10. Abraham Jacob Ramek, head of the *Judenrat*, was a young man from Mlawa, a

tailor by trade. Before the war, he had married a woman from Plonsk and moved there. At the start of the occupation, he worked as a street sweeper in the town. He was chosen to head the *Judenrat* by chance. At first the Germans presented him with trivial demands, e.g., to provide them with sundry items. Ramek knew how to please them and was also good at persuading the Jews that it was worth giving the Germans what they wanted and that they should consider it a kind of bribe that would help them to get by "until the storm passes." He apparently found ways to establish contact with the German subdistrict administrator and his deputy. As chairman of the *Judenrat*, Ramek exploited his previous connections and strove to release Jews from detention and even to trade with the Germans to obtain food for the ghetto. According to one account, Ramek was instrumental in the killing of several notorious Jews who were Gestapo agents in Plonsk and Warsaw.

Ramek and his family were in the last transport to Auschwitz from the Plonsk ghetto, which left on December 16, 1942. They were all murdered upon arrival.

11. *Appell*—roll call, a regular feature in the routine of concentration and extermination camp prisoners. *Appells* were held twice a day: at dawn, before the prisoners left for work, and in the evening, on their return. There was sometimes also a "special *Appell*," for example, after an escape attempt; on such occasions, the prisoners would be made to stand for hours.

12. *Schilfenmeier* ("reed steward")—the name gives a clue as to the essence of this detail's work—collecting and burning vegetation in the lakes.

13. *Bekleidungskammer*—a warehouse where clothing for prisoners was kept. Almost all the clothes were taken from people who reached the camp in the transports. Most prisoners who worked in the *Bekleidungskammer*, as well as the Kapos in charge of them, were Jewish.

14. Kapo—see Chapter 2, note 24.

15. Sauna—see Chapter 3, note 16.

16. *Lagerälteste*—"camp elder," a long-serving prisoner higher in rank than a *Blockälteste* or barracks elder, who was answerable to the Germans for order and discipline in the camp and, in particular, for prompt and correct execution of their instructions. Both Jews and non-Jews held the position in each of the Auschwitz and Birkenau camps.

17. *Blocksperre*—barracks curfew, announced whenever special operations took place in the camp, especially those involving killing, e.g., assembling prisoners before hangings, or to take them to the gas chambers or transfer them to other camps. The prisoners were confined in their barracks until the curfew was over. Initially, the *Blocksperre* was implemented as a matter of routine whenever a transport arrived. Later on, such curfews were announced only when a special group (e.g., Gypsies) was about to be executed.

18. On the numbering of the crematoria at Auschwitz-Birkenau, see Chapter 1, note 35.

19. "The *dayan* from Makow"—Lajb Langfus. See Esther Mark, "Notes on the Identity of the Anonymous Author and on His Manuscript," in Ber Mark (ed.), *The Scrolls of Auschwitz,* Tel Aviv, 1985, pp. 166–170; for details of this and other publications of the "secret writings" of Sonderkommando members, see Chapter 1, note 108.

Nathan Cohen, "Diaries of the Sonderkommandos in Auschwitz: Coping with Fate and Reality," *Yad Vashem Studies,* Vol. 20, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 195–197.

20. *Zulage*—prisoners' jargon for "extra," mainly extra food, which meant so much to them.

21. Moishe Burak—see Chapter 3, note 53.

22. See Chapter 3, note 51.

23. Regarding religious observance, see Chapter 1, "Religious Life."

24. In Auschwitz and Birkenau there were several prisoner orchestras that performed on various occasions. On Sundays, for example, there was a concert for the SS on the small lawn opposite the command headquarters building. (Remains of the stage on which the orchestra sat are still visible today.) Well-connected prisoners ("prominents," as they were called) were sometimes allowed to attend the special concerts. The orchestras regularly played at the gates to the camp, morning and afternoon, as the prisoners in the labor details left for work and returned.

25. See Chapter 2, note 23.

26. *Stubenführer*—the prisoner responsible for cleaning and tidying the prisoners' living quarters. Mr. Silberberg is actually referring to the job of *Stubendienst* (barrack room duty).

27. *Blockälteste*—"barracks elder," the prisoner whom the Germans placed in charge of the prisoners' living quarters.

28. *Schreibstube*—the camp registration office, responsible for the camp's internal administrative affairs. Data about who lived in the barracks, the number of people who had arrived in transports and entered the camp, the up-to-date count of prisoners, etc., were meticulously recorded in a detailed card index. Only prisoners (men and women) worked at the *Schreibstube* and it was a prized appointment.

29. *Postenkette*—chain of sentries in the watchtowers, in the two security rings around the camp—the "small" inner chain (*kleine Postenkette*) and the "large" outer guard chain (*grosse Postenkette*). The "small" chain in Auschwitz and Birkenau surrounded the camp directly along the electric barbed wire fence. The "large" chain protected the outer perimeter of the camp, enclosing an area of forty square kilometers. The "small chain" was manned only in the early evening, after the prisoners returned from work. During the day, the points in the "large chain" were manned.

30. *Sprengkommando*—the "demolition detail," set up in November–December 1944 as the time to evacuate the camp approached. Its task was to blow up various buildings, chiefly the crematoria, which the Germans wanted to destroy before the evacuation. Explosives such as dynamite were used.

31. Bielsk—town in Plock district, first settled by Jews in the early sixteenth century. In the nineteenth century, the Jewish community developed considerably: an autonomous community administration was established, a synagogue was built, and the community hired its own rabbi. In the autumn of 1939, the Germans renamed the town Steinhausen, incorporated it into the Ciechanow district, and annexed it, along the entire region, to the German Reich. This is what later gave Mr. Silberberg the impression that "most of the inhabitants were German." Between 1939 and 1941, there were two hundred Jews in Bielsk. Most of them were deported to Slupia Nowa in early March 1941 and the few who remained were deported at the end of that year.

32. Cieszyn—a border town divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia, thirty-five kilometers west of Bielsko-Biala. One of the oldest towns in Poland, founded some twelve hundred years ago. The Polish-Czech border since 1920, demarcated by the Olza River, runs through Cieszyn.